












CLAUDE.

VOL. I.



Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2025

<https://archive.org/details/claude00blak>

# CLAUDE.

BY

LADY BLAKE,

AUTHOR OF

“HELEN'S FIRST LOVE,”

“THE HAMMONDS OF HOLYCROSS,”

&c. &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

HURST AND BLACKETT, PUBLISHERS,  
13, GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET.

1870.

*The right of Translation is reserved.*

LONDON :

PRINTED BY MACDONALD AND TUGWELL, BLENHEIM HOUSE,  
BLENHEIM STREET, OXFORD STREET.



# CLAUDE.

---

## CHAPTER I.

THERE were only three of us at the old home when my father died—I mean of us young ones. Not that I was so very young either at that time, though I was the youngest of the first family. I did not remember my own mother, for she died a year after I was born, and in another year my father married again. My step-mother, Mrs. Markham, was the only one I had ever known as my father's wife, and as filling the place of mother to myself. I do not think she filled it much to her own satisfaction or mine either, for, though there were not much more than a couple of

years between me and her eldest-born, Claude, she always made a difference between us that seemed to remind every one that one was the *real*, the other only the pretended child of her heart. My brother Piers was the eldest of our family, and, as I have said, I, Marian, was the youngest of the six little children left to deplore a mother's loss.

Perhaps it was not wonderful that my father felt the want of a lady in his household to look after his family and domestic affairs; and hence came the hasty wedding with Lord Ramsay's rather plain daughter.

The Honourable Charlotte Ramsay was neither young nor pretty when she listened to the recently-widowed Mr. Markham's proposal to become his wife. It was probably the first offer of the kind she had ever received, and possibly fearing it might be the last, she eagerly accepted it, and in a short time after became my father's wife.

We were an old Yorkshire family, with a long pedigree, but of no considerable fortune,

though independent and well off in the world. When I say that, it may be understood that our social position in that aristocratic county was not amongst its magnates. We had, however, a good and respectable acquaintance in our own immediate neighbourhood, and were well-esteemed there; but we had little to do with the great world beyond. What strange ambition, therefore, prompted my poor father when he first thought of Lord Ramsay's daughter as his second wife I cannot tell. I have heard it hinted that the idea of their marriage originated with the lady; and that being the case, the problem is easily solved. Lord Ramsay's peerage, too, dated but a few years back, himself only being a law lord, and the first of the creation. It was, therefore, a very barren honour that the alliance conferred on the old Markham family. Still it was not without certain results, which were rather unfavourable than otherwise to its well-being. It seemed that the very questionable savour of aristocracy imported into

the family by my father's new wife appeared of far more consequence in that lady's estimation than in that of any other person. It made her very exacting in all matters of expenditure, and very tenacious of what she considered due to herself and her own children, as small far-off scions of nobility.

The Honourable Mrs. Markham came to her new abode after her marriage with a very firm determination to hold her own there, and lead a very different sort of life from that which had contented my gentle mother for the dozen or so years of her happy, blameless wedded life.

I should perhaps mention a fact here, often alluded to by my step-mother, that the first Mrs. Markham, being only the daughter of a poor curate, was, she declared, no judge of what was befitting the higher sphere of life into which my father's love had removed her, but brought with her to the old Manor-house most of the simple ways and unostentatious habits that had sufficed her girlish life. I be-



lieve her husband loved her and her ways too well to wish to alter either in any respect. But it is certain, if he had desired an entire change in his domestic life, he found it after he had married his second wife. Happily, my father was an easy-tempered man, and more disposed to evade trouble than encounter it or fight it down. He was handsome in person, open-hearted in disposition, and, Yorkshireman though he was, unsuspicious of evil design in others. He would sooner conciliate an enemy than retaliate upon him; he was nevertheless brave as the day, and so tenderly careful of wounding a woman's feelings, that, let her conduct and requests be ever so unreasonable, he would find excuses for, and seek the means of gratifying them.

This little statement is given in explanation of the manner in which the second Mrs. Markham contrived to govern my father, and exercise such an unfortunate influence over his affairs. I do not know that there was any real evil in her disposition, or that she was

fully aware of the mischief that was actually done to his family and fortune. She was a vain and somewhat foolish woman, pleased with having achieved the dignity of wifedom at last, and proud of being the mother of two children, the elder of whom was remarkably handsome. She was not disposed, however, to forego any present gratification with a view to their future benefit in life, though the neglected their interest in this way, and seriously injured my father's fortune and his children by her extravagance and self-indulgence—not, as I have said, with “malice prepense,” but from a recklessness that ignored the rights of others, and cared for nothing, except as it ministered to her own advantage or pleasure.

Of course I was no judge of what I have advanced in the early years of my father's second marriage, nor could I for very many years after conceive why so great a difference should be made between those two younger children and the six others that had preceded them. I do not

even know whether my father was cognizant of all that was going on in that way in his own house, for there was much that was unpleasant, and yet of too impalpable a character to be accurately defined. At all events, he never took any active part on his children's behalf; or if he ever did (though the results might be favourable to us), we were quite unaware when or in what way the movement had been made.

Mrs. Markham's lavish expenditure of my father's comfortable though by no means large fortune was another point in which no remonstrance, it seems, had any effect. She took every advantage of her husband's generous nature, and pleaded her own habits of luxurious expense in her father's aristocratic establishment as an excuse for her nonconformity with the more homely arrangements of the Manor-house household. This plea generally silenced my father, for he naturally desired to avoid the imputation of subjecting his wife to what she considered a parsimonious and nig-

gantly style of living, as contrasted with what she had been used to.

Thus it was that in his over-indulgent liberality to a vain, silly, ostentatious woman, his affairs, hitherto so well conducted and so amply sufficing to all his wants, became entangled in a hopeless web of yearly-increasing difficulty. All this did not become fully apparent till my father's rather sudden death brought many things to light that would otherwise no doubt have remained long concealed, or at best but partially known.

No words can express the loss—the bitter, irretrievable loss my father's death was to his family. As I have said, we were but three in number at that time. My brother Piers had left us for India many years before, and of the four intervening children between him and me none remained—they had all died; so he and I alone remained of the first family, with our dozen years of separation between us.

I remembered very little of Piers, for he had left us when he was barely twenty, and I



consequently but eight years old. Still I was dearly attached to such recollections as I had preserved of my only brother. That remembrance was constantly refreshed by letters addressed to his little sister, and presents of far more value than I could appreciate at that time. Piers had left home in rather a rebellious state of mind, I fear. He could not bring himself to love, or even like, his step-mother, although he was but a boy of twelve at the time of his father's second marriage. Neither did Mrs. Markham love her step-son, or care to make any pretence that she did so. I fancy Piers was not a very attaching youth to those he cared little for; neither was he good-looking in those early days. He was tall and strong, and resolute-looking enough, I have been told, but had little of the graceful beauty which distinguished his younger brother Claude. As far as so selfish a woman as Mrs. Markham could care for any one, she loved her handsome son; her only other child, a daughter, grew up far less pretty than the promise of

her youthful days had given room to expect.

Juliet, in spite of her early childish beauty and her pretty name, was a quiet, commonplace-looking fair girl at seventeen, her age at the time we lost our mutual friend and father.

Mrs. Markham's maternal affection had cooled in great measure as Juliet grew up so much plainer than she had predicted; and what there was of affection in her nature she lavished on her handsome son Claude.

I was at that time twenty-two years of age, and felt so much older than my half-sister, that I bestowed on her some of the motherly regard that was wanting for her in other quarters. Claude was at that time nearly one-and-twenty; and the absent Piers was then full five-and-thirty. He seemed to us younger ones quite a middle-aged man, and well-fitted to fill the responsible office as head of our bereaved household. He was, as I have said, in India at the time our great calamity befell us. He was not in the Army, but in

the Civil Service there, and had for some time held a very lucrative situation ; we had all believed he would remain there till he came home an old man, and a rich nabob. We did not very well know what that might mean, but we were all inclined to look upon Piers as a man whose future wealth and importance would amply atone for all the inroads which family extravagance might have made in the hereditary property.

My father's death took place in London, where it was Mrs. Markham's pleasure to drag her reluctant husband year by year, when funds could be raised to meet the heavy expenses attendant on the move. Whilst Mrs. Markham's father lived (which was but a short time after their marriage), his house was open for a certain time to them. After Lord Ramsay's death, the habit of going there was continued, at a great sacrifice of money and comfort to my father, who cared nothing for fashionable society, and passed his time in town, amongst a few old friends and such

neighbours as might be met at that season. Still he was too loyal and kind a husband not to accompany his wife to London, or morosely to interfere with her enjoyments when there.

This had gone on for the two-and-twenty years of their married life with little alteration. Sometimes my father had made a feeble protest against their leaving their family so many weeks, sometimes months, alone; and had latterly ventured to suggest that I was surely of an age to accompany them to London, and share in such pleasures and advantages as might be derived from the life Mrs. Markham loved to lead there.

She had an unanswerable argument in reply, to negative this proposition. First, the immense increase of expense it would involve; and secondly, that as she chiefly visited amongst her own family and friends, she could hardly expect them to encumber themselves with a raw country girl, such as she was pleased to call me; and so I remained quietly at home,



looking after my sister Juliet, and amusing myself in the best way otherwise that I could.

Meanwhile our younger brother Claude had been sent, regardless of expense, both to Eton and to Oxford; and it was at the latter place he received the tidings of our great family bereavement. His mother had insisted on the necessity of her son going to Eton, on account of the acquaintances he might make there; and expatiated much on the many advantages that would accrue to him from being brought up there. But it seemed to me the *learning* part of his education was the last thing she thought about in the choice of a school for her son. Mrs. Markham and even my father were well satisfied to see him as gentlemanlike in his manner as he was handsome in person; whether his mind was as well cultivated, remained for time to prove.

## CHAPTER II.

THE old home would have been rather dull—  
what with the frequent absences of our father and his wife, and both our brothers away—had it not been for our nearest neighbours. These consisted of the family of Mr. Crofton, at the Hall of the same name, about three miles distant, and that of my grandfather, comprising himself and grandson, Luke Dillon. Parson Dillon, as he was generally denominated, had long been the incumbent of our parish. He was but the Curate at the time my father married his daughter; but a few years after, the Rector dying, the living had been given to him by the father of our other neighbour, Mr. Crofton. This Mr. Crofton owned most of the land about

us, my father's small estate not counting above fifteen hundred acres in all—and many of these had in late years become mortgaged to our greater and more wealthy neighbour.

There was a sorrowful history attached to this Mr. Crofton's antecedents. It is one I do not care to enter very fully upon, nor is it necessary for the progress of my story. It will be enough to say that Mr. Crofton married early in life: his wife was a very beautiful girl, whom he passionately loved. At the time of his marriage he was in the Army, and his elder brother and father being then alive, he did not give up his profession, but travelled about with his regiment, his wife being with him. In the first year of his marriage his only child was born, a daughter—called after her mother Florence, but whom we in later years knew only as Flora Crofton. Keene Crofton was very happy for the first seven years of his marriage, and then came a dreadful blight upon his future life and prospects. His wife, so lovely and beloved, deceived and deserted him.

Soon after that wretched event both his father and elder brother died within the space of a year, and Mr. Crofton succeeded to the fortune and family estates. He was only thirty at that time, and little Flora was but seven years old. It was just ten years, at the time of my father's death, since Keene Crofton came into our neighbourhood and took up his abode at the old family place, Crofton Hall.

Being but a child of thirteen at that time, I only heard mysterious whispers concerning our new neighbour at the Hall. I remember very well the look of awe with which I gazed furtively on the dark, handsome, but most unhappy looking man who made his weekly appearance in the Hall pew at our parish church, with his pretty little girl and a very pleasing looking lady somewhat younger than himself, who we soon heard was his sister. None of the family had lived at the old Hall for many years—they came therefore as strangers amongst us. Indeed it was on that account that Mr. Crofton had decided to live at the place. The Croftons

owned another and finer estate in the South of England, and there old Mr. Crofton had lived and died. When Keene Crofton had elected to take up his abode in our wild and thinly inhabited country he had just passed through the terrible ordeal of a public trial, by which he was released from the ties which bound him to a faithless wife, but which seemed, at the same time, to have severed all the interests which had bound him to society. He felt his position deeply and acutely, and was a disappointed, moody, wretched man.

Ten years had passed away since that time; his faithless wife was dead; but it appeared he had conceived an intense distrust of all womankind in consequence of her wretched lapse; he had loved and trusted her so entirely. And to add to the misery of the whole affair, the man who had betrayed him was not only a fellow-officer, but particular friend of his own.

Hence it came to pass, that Keene Crofton felt himself, as it were, placed in antagonism with every man, as well as woman, in the

world, for all time to come. I believe he made some exception to his sister Mary, who accompanied him into his retirement with his little girl. She had been on the point of marriage herself at the time, but had postponed all her happier prospects, to go into exile, as it seemed, for a time with her brother, till he became more reconciled to his position. In consequence of this delay on Miss Crofton's part, misunderstandings arose between her and her lover; and these increased so unhappily, that in the course of another year he revenged himself on his promised bride, and no doubt on himself also, by marrying another wife. So poor Mary Crofton was in her turn deceived and deserted too. Though the cases were by no means parallel, they were sufficiently similar in their results to draw the brother and sister more closely together, with bands of no common strength of sympathy and attachment. Thus Mary Crofton had remained for ten years the mistress of her brother's house, and her faithless lover, Sir Edward Mainwaring, had

been married nearly as many, and both had apparently resigned themselves to their early disappointment, and found fresh objects of love and interest.

For the first year or two after the Croftons came to the Hall they steadily resisted every effort made by their two nearest neighbours, my father and grandfather, who wished to tempt the moody man into more friendly relations, whilst they felt a compassionate interest in the sister and little girl, who were also so entirely secluded. At the end of the third year an accidental circumstance occurred which brought the two families together at last.

My father happened to meet Miss Crofton and her little niece out walking, and rescue them from some peril they were exposed to from a drove of wild cattle on the moors : and as he himself ran considerable risk in the affair, it made the first opening towards kindly and neighbourly feeling between the two families.

I think Mary Crofton must have hailed the prospect of renewed intercourse with a few of



her fellow-creatures, for, in spite of her unhappy love story, she was not a woman to pass all her days lamenting. She had no doubt felt her lover's desertion acutely, but the same brave, unselfish spirit, which had made her cling to her brother in his misery, upheld her also when her own prospects became clouded over. She believed her life was given her for other purposes than wearing herself out in vain and useless repining, and refusing to be made happy in any way except that which was denied her. It was strange, perhaps, and rather touching to see that, although so resolute and self-sacrificing in her own case, she was tenderly indulgent towards her brother's frame of mind and habit of morbid despondency. She always seemed to think her own sorrows so light when compared with his, they were hardly worthy of consideration. In fact, after the first wrench, and after she had heard of Sir Edward Mainwaring's actual marriage, she thought of herself and her individual troubles very little at all.

In time our two families became as intimate as the near neighbourhood, and otherwise solitary surroundings, seemed to demand. Mr. Crofton's despairing grief and angry retrospections faded away at last under the calming influence of time and the daily interest of passing events. It must be so, however tenacious humanity may be of its own sorrows, so all-important to the sufferer, for nature cannot retain the same vivid impression as in the early days of trial. Time will in all cases do its work of partial obliteration. No doubt there is often a certain habit of mind formed in those periods of trial which survives the poignancy of the grief, and, be it for good or evil, exerts an influence over the remaining years of life.

Thus Mr. Crofton's mind, as I have told, emerged from its baptism of suffering, changed and altered in many respects. He was no longer overwhelmed with vain regrets, and vainer grief, but those griefs had stamped their indelible traces on his character and

disposition, and it was thus altered, and, I may add, in some degree deteriorated from its original nature, when we first became acquainted with him, his sister, and little girl. It was difficult to tell whether he really loved the child much, or not. She was extremely pretty, and always remained so. Indeed, hers was a style of beauty that increased and became more perfect as she grew older. The Croftons were all dark. Mary was a sparkling brunette once, but she became much paler, after her early bloom had passed away.

Flora resembled her beautiful mother, I was told, in the delicacy of her features and complexion, and the golden hue of her luxuriant hair; but she differed from her in inheriting the dark eyes and brows of her father and his family, and this circumstance gave a peculiar charm and character to her beauty.

At the time when the Croftons first came amongst us, they made a slight acquaintance, as though in duty bound, with the clergyman's (my grandfather's) family; and he, who

was the kindest and simplest of human beings, with Aunt Alice (then living), who was like him in every respect, did his utmost to fan the little spark of toleration into a more genial flame of cordiality. For some time it was all in vain; though the good parson and his daughter lived in hopes of more friendly and neighbourly intercourse with the Croftons, neither brother nor sister seemed to care to break the spell which held them aloof.

Mary no doubt acted solely in compliance with her brother's wishes, totally suppressing any desires she might have had herself on the subject. At last, as I have said, the ice was broken, and the Markhams were at length recognized and acknowledged as friends and neighbours by them, as well as Mr. Dillon and his daughter.

Every one was well inclined to make all due allowances for Mr. Crofton's peculiar position, and consequent soreness of mind. Thus it was he became from the first a sort of privileged person amongst us; not in any way owing to

the superiority of his possessions, but to the consideration of past suffering which had been so peculiarly his portion.

And yet I may be wrong in saying this, as regarded the whole of my father's household, for I think Mrs. Markham did tolerate and excuse all shortcomings of respect and civility on the part of her neighbour, more because he was a man whose family and position stood high in the great world without, and he himself was known to be rich, and could have been great also, had he so wished it, than because he was the victim of a great domestic sorrow, and was weighed down by an almost morbid sense and recollection of the same.

Still Mrs. Markham was a woman of the world, and she could make herself very pleasant when so inclined; and perhaps—such is the perversity of character and inclination—she did more to relieve and enliven the gloomy recluse at Crofton Hall than all that dear Aunt Alice, with her cheerful, unpretending

goodness, had been able to accomplish. It was not that Mr. Crofton seemed to find anything particularly charming in my step-mother's conversation, but it appeared to be more suggestive, as it were, to him of past scenes and phases of life in which he had himself borne a part; and he could at times differ from her, and have the satisfaction of proving her in the wrong: whilst dear Aunt Alice being ever ready to own herself so, there was neither pleasure nor profit to be gained in any argument with her.

Thus the acquaintance between the three families progressed, and Mary Crofton's friendship became an invaluable boon to me. I was always afraid of her brother, for he was apt to cut up my crude, girlish remarks, and to ridicule the effervescing nature of my early friendship for Mary, who was so many years older than myself. But then he was not kinder to Flora, whom, as she grew older, he watched and repressed with an uncompromising strictness that by no means suited the

ideas of that very pretty and lively young lady. At the same time, he would be more tolerant of Juliet's insipidity, and the absence of any charm of look or manner, which excited her mother's increasing regrets and apprehensions that her daughter would after all be a very quiet and ordinary-looking girl. I remember Mr. Crofton replying once to Mrs. Markham, who frankly confided her apprehensions to him in that respect—"You seem to be afraid your daughter will disappoint your wishes in regard to turning out either beautiful or fascinating. Now my sentiments are the exact reverse of yours—there is nothing I fear so much for mine as that she may do both."



## CHAPTER III.

AND so it came to pass that Flora *did* grow up beautiful. At seventeen she was perfectly lovely. On the other hand, at the same age (for the two girls were within a month or two of each other) Juliet had as few pretensions to good looks, without being absolutely plain, as can well be imagined. Her features were not bad, but they were utterly void of expression; her hair was light, and so was her complexion, without being remarkably fair; tall, but not graceful, and apparently apathetic to a degree that made her equally regardless of her mother's complaints or Mr. Crofton's questionable compliments.

I was fond of Juliet; her unruffled com-

posure was rather soothing; and in her passive way she was much attached to me. We always got on extremely well when left to take care of each other—or, rather, when I was supposed to be her custodian.

I enjoyed the privilege of having a good governess till I was seventeen, and then it was supposed that I was qualified to teach Juliet, having been so well instructed myself. So my prudent step-mother dismissed Miss Walker, and told me I was old enough, and, it was to be hoped, well-informed enough, to make myself useful. The office laid upon me did not weigh very heavily, for Juliet was quite well disposed; so we studied together—as much or as little as we fancied.

The greatest advantage I then enjoyed was being asked by Mary Crofton to bring my sister-pupil to take her lessons and share the instructions of Flora's school-room; which in process of time became our constant habit, the governess there declaring it was much pleasanter to teach two girls together than one,

and that one so idle as Flora was well known to be.

No one objected to this plan. Mrs. Markham was well pleased that Juliet should reap such benefit, though she made light of, or rather chose to ignore, any obligation conferred upon herself or daughter. She would sometimes observe carelessly on our return from Crofton Hall, which was (across our fields) little more than a mile distant—

“Oh! so you have taken the lesson-books over to the Hall, Marian! Well, I daresay the Croftons are glad enough to get some one to learn with that idle little puss Miss Flora. Miss Müller told me she wanted application so much; and then, though she speaks very good English for a German, I daresay she finds great advantage in talking to you, and hearing how Miss Walker arranged about your lessons and all that.”

So, according to Mrs. Markham, *we* were conferring, instead of receiving, obligation and instruction at one and the same time! It

certainly was quite a new idea to me.

The Miss Walker referred to had been a good and efficient governess in our family for some ten years, and I was no doubt indebted to her for a very fair share of accomplishments and general information on most subjects. But she was precise and formal, and cared little about the inner life of her pupil's hearts and minds. So, whilst the latter reaped the full benefit of such instruction as she was qualified and perfectly willing to impart, the former remained barren and unsatisfied—at least as far as she was concerned.

All that I needed there was, however, most tenderly supplied by the Aunt Alice I have casually mentioned; and I may as well add, that whatever there might be of good and sterling worth in my character and disposition, was owing to her gentle but most unobtrusive teaching. She was my mother's only sister, and I believe they greatly resembled each other both in appearance and a winning sweetness of manner that was peculiar to

themselves. I had, however, the great misfortune to lose this invaluable friend at an age when I most required her guidance, for Aunt Alice died when I was barely sixteen. The following year, as I have said, Miss Walker was dismissed, and Juliet, who had hitherto shared in her instructions, was committed wholly to my charge.

I believe I was only too thankful to rest my burden on the willing shoulders of the kind-hearted, clever little German governess at the Hall, Miss Müller; and Mary Crofton was anxious to give me all the benefit of such an arrangement, whilst she assured me that Juliet's partaking of her lessons was of incalculable importance to the volatile Flora. Mrs. Markham, in consequence, felt little or no compunction in leaving us two girls for weeks sometimes together, to be taken care of by our friends and neighbours at Crofton Hall.

This brought about a considerable degree of intimacy between all the members of our

respective families, and I soon began to reckon the days spent at the Hall amongst the happiest of my life. I think, in the absence of gayer or more congenial society, Miss Crofton was glad to have me often with her. Juliet was no less acceptable to Flora, who was just emerging from the schoolroom, though still under the charge of Miss Müller, who remained at the Hall for some little time, as a companion when no longer needed as a governess ; whilst I joined Mary and her brother in whatever might be the occupation or amusement of the hour.

I was still afraid of Mr. Crofton. If I said anything very flat or commonplace, I could feel his dark eyes turned towards me with a scrutinizing glance that seemed to pierce to the depths of my shallowness, and make me feel convinced of folly before the words were well out of my mouth. Nevertheless, he shewed at times that he did not utterly despise me, for when in an amiable mood he would give me books to read, and sometimes

gave me what was more valuable, the benefit of his own remarks on their contents, whilst with a rare power of discernment, he could analyse and separate the good from the worthless, and give to each its proper place and prominence. No one had a more ready talent than Mr. Crofton for discernment of motive and of character, or could more ably detect the first tones of false sentiment, and all that unsound philosophy which is so often attractive to a youthful mind. Many a hero or heroine of my imagination has been ruthlessly stript of the tinsel that I took for pure gold, and shewn to me thus stript in very different colours from those with which my fancy had invested them. Sometimes I was unwilling to relinquish my girlish opinion, and to see my fool's paradise, so desecrated and laid waste; but it may be supposed I was little skilled in holding my own against such a formidable opponent, and have sometimes ended my argument by shedding bitter tears of mortification at the caustic and pungent re-

torts my contumacy had called forth.

My father had on his part also formed a considerable intimacy with Mr. Crofton, unlike as the two men were, and differing so greatly in age, and occupations, and former manner of life. Still there was a substratum of reality about both that made them coalesce pleasantly enough, after they had broken down the earlier barriers of reserve, and become intimate enough to recognise the sterling worth that was comprised in each individual character.

Although Mr. Crofton was so much younger a man than my father—being, in fact, but a very few years senior to my brother Piers—yet he was the older man in heart and character. He was much harder and more unyielding than my father. He was, too, by birth, bringing up, and after-life, far more a man of the world than his elder friend had ever been. Mrs. Markham had tried her possible to make my father live the life she loved so well; but after so many years spent in a different way, the character gets a certain bend that is not



so easily remodelled. So, though Mrs. Markham managed to unsettle my father's former easy manner of life, she could not bring him to love, or even like, the new experiences she placed before him at every turn.

For twenty years this uncongenial state of things went on; but if my father had found out and repented himself of the mistake he had made in his second marriage, he never let the world into his confidence. He was naturally of so easy a temper and disposition that, instead of opposing the various innovations and encroachments on his time and comfort, he let his wife take her own way, and, as far as he was obliged, he followed in it. But his home interests diminished; he found he could do so little there as he would have liked; neither could he control the expenditure in which his wife chose to indulge when there. If he argued the matter, the general result was that some little comfort was taken from himself or children, and then he was told it was all his doing.

My appointment to the situation from which Miss Walker was dismissed was one of the consequences of some such little gentle remonstrance on my father's part. I believe it was some expensive new sort of equipage that my step-mother craved, after seeing one of her richer relations in possession of a similar one, and being told by my father he could not afford either that, or the horse, or additional servant it would involve. Her reply was that, as she *must* have it, their only plan would be to part with the governess, and leave me to supply her place to my younger sister. Thus it was in various instances, and my father's fortune, never large, became seriously involved; and as he felt himself too weak to stem the tide that was hurrying them on to ruin, his spirits began to fail, and then his health also.

His last effort was to follow his wife to London, where she had received an invitation to join some of her own family; and it was whilst there the sad blow fell on our distant

home, and the father we loved so well died.

The announcement of that sad event was a great shock to all his children, and one for which we were totally unprepared. I can remember to this day the horror with which I was struck on receiving the intelligence, conveyed, too, through a very cold and somewhat unsympathising channel—my cousin, Luke Dillon—when Juliet and I happened to be passing a few days at Crofton Hall, and he came over with his wretched tidings.

My father and his wife had been absent some weeks, and we were—that is, Juliet and I—shortly expecting to see them back. During their frequent absences, we were always left at home—on some pretext or another—and my grandfather was supposed to have the charge of us whilst they were away. The Parsonage was very near, and the distance favourable enough for the constant intercourse of the two families. After the death of poor Aunt Alice, I did not care much about going there. I loved my kind old grandfather dearly,

but he was no companion for me; and after he had lost all his children, he could not take up his grandchildren to fill the blank their premature removal had made. Still, when he was left quite alone, and his strength began so greatly to fail him, he sent for his grandson Luke, to come and be his curate, and reside with him. The young man, on his part, was glad to come, for both his father and mother were dead, and he too was alone in the world.

So the old and young man came together in their isolation, but with this wide difference—Luke Dillon's life was all before him—a future which might yet be filled in with happy domestic relations; the old clergyman's future was not of this world—his path there lay bleak and desolate before him, never more to be peopled with happy, well-known, dearly-loved forms and faces. Still the old man was cheerful in his way, and kindly thoughtful of us young people, and had ever a few words of cordial welcome for us when we

went to the Parsonage. But it was all so different from what it had been in the lifetime of Aunt Alice, that it made me melancholy to go into that deserted, pretty little drawing-room, where we had so often sat and talked together; and when Luke went to the Parsonage, as it were in her place, I cared very little to go myself.

He was a cold-mannered young man, about six-and-twenty when he first came amongst us; and that was just a year before my father died. He appeared very devoted to the duties of his profession, and rather intolerant towards all who differed from him in their views, or who regarded worldly amusements in any other light than sinful practices, to be shunned and avoided in every possible way.

For myself, I had never had the opportunity either of indulging in, or of avoiding society in its gay phases. Although long of an age to have mixed in it had my step-mother so wished, I had been left at home

when she went out into the world. The most I had seen of society was comprised in the parties which, by Mrs. Markham's invitation, assembled for a short time at our old house during the best time of the shooting-season.

But of the people who visited us then, I seldom saw much, as I was supposed to be engaged with Juliet, who was not old enough to appear in company; and therefore, as she was always absent on such occasions, except for an hour or so in the evening, I found my step-mother was quite as well pleased with my room as my company. Indeed, as our apartments were not very large, and our table in the dining-room only calculated to entertain a limited number of guests, it soon came to be understood that I was not expected or required to appear at the late dinner when people were staying in the house. So Juliet and I took an early meal in the privacy of our own apartments. I was constitutionally shy and sensitive, so it may be

supposed these understood prohibitions did not tend to remove the feeling. Still, I rather rejoiced than otherwise in the seclusion to which I was consigned.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE manner in which Luke Dillon acquitted himself of his miserable errand at Crofton Hall did not tend to increase my cousinly regard for him. What he might have felt on the occasion I cannot tell—more, it is to be hoped, than his demeanour betrayed, for my father had always been a kind and, I believe, generous relation to him. I imagine his mind was so bent on “improving the occasion” to Juliet and me, that he forgot to have any feeling of his own about it. He had been requested by my grandfather first to see Miss Crofton, and make her the medium of the sad communication. But that advice did not suit Luke’s views of what was



right to be done on the occasion; he preferred being himself the herald of the wretched tidings to those most nearly concerned in them.

I shall never forget that memorable interview in the large old library at Crofton Hall, where he had requested to see Juliet and I alone. I suppose we both took the announcement according to our differing natures and dispositions. Juliet appeared calm, though I well knew she was greatly shocked; whilst my own violent and irrepressible grief was so overwhelming, that I was unable to attend to a word of the exhortation which Luke was delivering with much unction, and which had no doubt been duly prepared on his road to the Hall.

I was at last roused, by his appeal becoming so pointed to myself, that I endeavoured for a moment to stem the torrent of my tears, and look up at the younger but stronger-minded sister, whose conduct he declared was so superior, and so far more Christian-like

than my own. As my eye fell on poor Juliet's marble white face and constrained figure, I rose hastily to go to her, and was just in time to save her from falling as she fainted in my arms. After that, Luke was contented to leave us together, and at last to seek Miss Crofton, and send her to us.

I need not dwell more at length on those interminably miserable days which succeeded our return home and my poor father's funeral, which took place the following week. After the large concourse of people (chiefly friends and relatives of Mrs. Markham's), which had assembled for that solemn day, had departed, we were left alone—alone, indeed, in the old home. Far more so then than in the many preceding years in which I had spent, sometimes weeks alone, with Juliet as my sole companion. Claude came home at that time, of course, and it seemed likely that he would remain with us, for it appeared we were very short of funds to pay his past college expenses, and to defray the

new ones he would incur by remaining. So Mrs. Markham decided that Claude should remain, and take his place as master of the old home, now the dearly-loved one was gone from us for ever.

My absent brother Piers was no doubt the real head of our family then, but he was absent still. There had been no time to summon him home to his father's death-bed—all that could be done was to write to tell him all was over, and to ask him what instructions he had to give, now he was master of the place and property. It had not been entailed upon Piers—happy would it have been had it been so! Mrs. Markham's reckless extravagance could not then have so deeply involved the family property and estate. She was securely provided for with a small—very small—fortune of her own, settled by her father entirely upon herself, and at her own disposal, and a larger sum had also been secured to her as jointure at the time of her marriage. That sum threatened

to swallow up all the interest of the available property that remained after my father's death. He had bequeathed by will the whole of his estate to his eldest son, with instructions to do the best he could for the two families, the jointure reverting to him on his step-mother's death.

At the time the will was made—soon after my father's second marriage—several of the children of the first family were alive; and as there was a prospect of a second one, nothing more definite had been arranged at the time.

No doubt my father's intention had been to make a fresh will later in life. There was one codicil added after Piers went to India; and that was, if he chose to remain there, his step-mother was to have the privilege of making her home at the Manor-house during his absence from England—and on no account was the place either to be let or sold. So far good—as it seemed to Mrs. Markham, and as Piers was at that time in India, she re-

mained in undisputed possession of the old home. Claude was by no means loath to take up his residence there, instead of returning to Oxford. He had several reasons for not caring particularly to return there. His first "little go" had been unsuccessful, and he was glad to escape a second, for which he was as unprepared as before.

We had not seen much of Claude for the last two years—his vacations having been spent away from home, either in making a little tour with college friends, or else passing the time at their houses. To Juliet and myself Claude's return to the Manor-house seemed like a new life there. Handsome, lively, careless Claude was quite a new feature, and a very attractive one, to us depressed, sad-hearted girls. At first he felt the sad change at home quite as deeply as it was fit and natural he should do. But grief was a very unnatural sentiment in the heart of the young man.

So in a few days his sorrow wore itself

out, and left room for the more congenial elements of his disposition to display themselves—and no doubt they were very serviceable at that time in helping Juliet and me to throw off something of the load of despondency with which we were both in our several ways oppressed.

In the meantime, Mrs. Markham mourned after the most approved fashion. I believe she was very much shocked; and, as far as lay in her nature, distressed at her husband's sudden death. Her grief was not, however, of so absorbing a nature as to prevent her taking part in all that was going on around her; from the important choice of the most becoming mourning, suitable to her situation, and the due consideration of all matters of business in which her own peculiar interests were concerned.

In all that concerned the latter department, she had a very able as well as willingly at her elbow, besides the old family lawyer, whose natural instincts were all as

fully engaged, perhaps, for his late friend's children as for the widow who seemed so well able to take her own part. There was very little to be said or done, however, in the absence of the rightful heir. All that remained to Mrs. Markham was to make the most of all she could claim as her own individual property: and as there was no opposition made, she got on very well, aided and assisted by the help afforded by this ally, being an elder and only sister, who had accompanied Mrs. Markham to her widowed home, and seemed likely to take up her abode for good with her. This lady, who was an excellent woman of business, was by no means taking, as a woman, either in manners or appearance.

For many years Miss Ramsay had kept her father's house, and on his death had attached herself to the household of a younger brother; he having lately married had intimated to his sister the desirableness of her finding another home.

Whilst the perplexing question was revolv-

ing in her mind as to where that home was to be made, the answer was suddenly and satisfactorily supplied by the unforeseen events that just then took place in her sister, Mrs. Markham's family. "The Honourable Alethea," as Claude always somewhat irreverently termed his aunt (from having observed her tenaciousness as to her proper title and address), was a few years older than her sister Charlotte—tall and masculine-looking—with a highly-coloured complexion and strongly-marked features, fierce dark eyes, and marked eyebrows surmounted with bands of raven black hair, that might or might not have been her own (except by right of purchase), and now attired in the deepest mourning, presented an appearance in which, though there might be much to fear, there was very little to love. She made herself useful, however, to the widow, and did much that no one else in the house was competent or inclined to do. If Mrs. Markham did not love her sister with any strong sisterly affection, she at least estimated



her for the part she took at that time, and seemed glad to have her with her.

Miss Ramsay's own means were at that time unfortunately small, as she had chosen to speculate with the liberal fortune left her by her father, and, owing to her self-sufficient obstinacy, had lost all, except a very minute proportion. She was in the main a clever, hard-headed woman, and up to most business transactions; but in her own case she had been blinded by her expectations of enormous interest arising from the speculation in which she rashly invested almost the whole of her money. Too late she found that whilst eagerly grasping at the shadow she had lost the substance—her present as well as prospective riches had sunk for ever!

The Honourable Alethea was, however, of a dauntless nature, and set herself to consider where she might most advantageously bestow herself and her few remaining effects, whilst she nursed the tiny remnant of her fortune; and, as has been said, the old home was the

place she selected for that purpose. She avowed her intentions with that openness which was part of her character ; but instead of these avowals having the pleasing effect of candour, they fell on the ear of the listener more as the decree of a dead fate, from which there was no appeal.

When Miss Ramsay had stated what she was going to do, and her reasons for so doing, you felt at once that as she had determined so it must be. The person addressed had no power of resistance. Could they be so unreasonable as to desire it? Thus, then, the Honourable Alethea remained in a quiescent state for nearly a month after her arrival at the Manor-house, during which time she had, no doubt, made her own observations and come to her deliberate conclusions. What these were I had the advantage of hearing, being in the room one morning, with the two sisters, occupied in some needlework at my step-mother's desire.

Miss Ramsay had been writing, whilst Mrs.

Markham sat near her on a sofa doing nothing, a quasi-occupation she often indulged in at that time. Miss Ramsay directed and fastened down her last letter; she closed her desk with emphasis, and turned the key with a sharp click. She then took off her spectacles, and turning her chair round, confronted her sister.

“Well, Charlotte, I have settled it.”

“What have you settled, Alethea?” asked the widow, in a slightly indifferent tone:

“Why, I have determined to give up my home at Charles’s, and have written to him and his wife. I shall not go back to them.”

“I thought all that was settled long ago. Charles said they would want your room as a nursery, and Emily made no secret of their wishing you to find a home somewhere else.”

“I know that,” said Alethea, perfectly undisturbed. “And I knew it for some time; but it is not so easy to change your home when you can’t make one for yourself.”

“You might have gone into lodgings somewhere,” suggested Mrs. Markham.

“So I might, or gone into a cheap boarding-house—which I suppose would have been better still—but neither of those places would have suited me. I don’t care to live by myself, or amongst a pack of under-bred strangers, such as are to be met with at cheap houses—boarding-houses, I mean. I like to live amongst my friends and equals, as I have always been accustomed to do, and as I always intend to do.”

“Well!” said Mrs. Markham, looking up at her determined sister—“I don’t quite agree with you there, Alethea. I do think a home of one’s own is always preferable to that, especially when people get tired of you—as you know they will do sometimes!”

“Ah! not if you can make yourself useful to them. Charles was never tired of me till he married—and of course if he wanted me no longer, it was time to go. I always knew it must come to that; but I should not have

stirred till I found a fit place to go to—that's the reason I have stayed on with you here."

"Thank you, Alethea! I thought you were staying out of kindness to me—in my great sorrow."

Here Mrs. Markham took out her handkerchief, and the Honourable Alethea continued quite unmoved—

"So it is, Charlotte; but I wished to see first, whether I could be useful to you if I settled to send for my things and remain here. Now I feel quite persuaded that I can be of more service to you in this out-of-the-way place than you can well imagine. I shall not be in your way, Charlotte; neither shall I let anyone here be in mine" (a glance across the room as this was said), "the house is large enough for all who have any right to live in it—and I shall save your pocket, more, Charlotte, than my trifling bit of board will cost—or that of my poor old maid, Clarkson; whom, you know, I could not part with, after so

many years of faithful service—(so, if you like it, for I am not going to stay unless you do—though my own mind is so fully made up on the subject)—but if you like to have me for the present—I am entirely at your service—there! Just say Yes, or No, and the matter is ended. Be as frank with me as I have been with you.”

There was no demur on the part of Mrs. Markham, who seemed, in her apathetic way, glad to have her active strong-minded sister as a fixture at the Manor-house; and so the matter was settled.

## CHAPTER V.

A DAY or two after this arrangement—which was duly completed by despatching the letter empowering the Honourable Charles Ramsay to send all his sister's possessions left in charge at his house to the Manor-house, Heatherfield, in the West Riding, Yorkshire; and, furthermore, by Miss Ramsay's taking possession of various keys willingly made over by Mrs. Markham to her charge, in lieu of the old housekeeper, discharged on the death of her late master. A day or two after all these ceremonies had been duly gone through, I found myself alone with the Honourable Alethea, who was now the dominant power in the old home. Not liking

the lady, or her presence there, or anywhere, I was gathering up my work preparatory to leaving the room, when she turned round quickly, begging I would remain. Thus ordered, and having neither the power nor the spirit to resist, I sat down listlessly in my accustomed place, but did not take up my work again, as I had no intention of remaining longer than I was compelled.

“I am glad to find you here, Miss Markham; I wanted to say a few words to you.”

No answer seeming to be required on my part, I made no attempt to speak, so the Honourable Alethea continued—

“You were in this room yesterday, and heard what passed between my sister and me?”

As she paused, I answered,

“Yes, some of it.”

“About my proposal to remain here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I am glad you heard us, as it spares



me the trouble of going over the old ground; and, as I always like to be perfectly frank and open in all my dealings, I wish you, as a daughter of the house, to know that I am going to make it my home for the present."

"Yes."

"Well, all that being understood, I hope we may all get on comfortably and happily together."

"I hope so," I murmured, being, at the same time, I confess, rather taken aback at this unexpected display of amiable feeling, having made up my mind to dislike Miss Ramsay exceedingly, and to avoid her society as far as it was in my power to do so. She took little notice of any want of cordiality in my manner of reply, but proceeded to ask me, in her usual "frank" manner,

"Pray, how old are you, Miss Markham?"

"I am two and twenty."

"Oh! really. You do not look so old. Why, you must be—let me see—yes, you are

six years older than Juliet. Who would think it?"

"Juliet will be eighteen in a few days."

"Ah! well, not quite six years between you; but five or six, it does not much signify; she looks older, and you look younger, that's all!"

That point seeming to be satisfactorily settled, I had nothing to remark on the subject, but sat quietly awaiting what further communication was to be made. After a short pause Miss Ramsay continued—

"And there is Claude, too. Why, he must be nearly one and twenty. What does my sister mean to do with him?"

As I knew nothing of her intentions I held my peace, and Miss Ramsay went on—

"I daresay she has never thought about it! Charlotte is like a child in some things, and always used to leave everything to her husband. Well, poor soul, she does want some one to think a little for her. Don't you think so, Miss Markham?"

Being startled at this direct appeal to myself, I answered, perhaps, as frankly as my interrogator,

“I think Mrs. Markham generally settled everything for herself. Poor papa, I know, always did exactly as she wished!”

Miss Ramsay looked up sharply at me as she asked quickly—

“Do you always call my sister Mrs. Markham?”

I coloured a little, for we were always instructed to call her “mamma:” and being so young at the time of my father’s second marriage, had naturally done so; but the extreme indifference (more than unkindness) she had always shown me, had prevented the sweet name ever going deeper than my lips,—so I answered—

“When I was a child I called her mamma.”

“Well, then, I advise you to do so now. I am sure Charlotte would wish it: and on my part I shall henceforth take the liberty of calling you by your Christian name—I think it

is Marian—though I hear Claude calls you Minnie?”

“Yes, he often does, and Piers always—”

“Ah, that is your own brother—the absent heir; I suppose he won’t care to come back here, as he is doing so well in India?”

I could not tell, for of course we had not heard from him since the great change had befallen our family; but Miss Ramsay continued—

“I suppose my sister or someone will hear from him next mail, and what allowance he means to settle on all of you. It is very hard on her now, having the whole burden of maintenance cast upon her, without knowing anything as to the future ways and means—but there is no help for it at present.”

“Surely,” said I, at last roused to make a remark, “surely there are the same means for the maintenance of the family here that there were in poor Papa’s lifetime?”

“By no means, my dear. I am sorry to say the family estate seems to be so greatly in-

volved: for your poor father appears to have been living much beyond his means for many years, and now the accounts are all in terrible confusion—hardly any ready money to be got anywhere. My sister's jointure can only just be covered, and till your brother makes some provision for all of you, you are all living upon that."

"But Juliet and Claude are her own children." I urged; "and as for me—if—if—"

I was going to say—if I am any burden I can go to my grandfather's—but Miss Ramsay took up my words before they were uttered and said:

"As for you, my dear, you are your father's child, and as such have every claim upon my sister. She will make no distinction between you and the other two—so pray dismiss from your mind all nonsensical ideas respecting step-mothers, which only exist in old-fashioned story-books. Of course you are welcome to a home, and all that, in my sister's house—for hers it is by right, so long as your brother does

not choose to live in it himself; only, of course, it would be pleasant to her to know what provision your brother is likely to make for his father's family."

"But why should Piers be obliged to provide for all of us? Suppose he was to marry?"

"Don't ask me, my dear! You ought to know more about it than I can do. I only heard your father's will left everything to your eldest brother, and he is to provide for all his brothers and sisters out of it."

"But I thought you said it was all spent?"

"No, my dear, I did not say that—I said it was *involved*; but if your brother is a rich man, as I suppose him to be, he can make it up from other sources; and of course, whatever Charlotte lays out upon you all out of her own means, Mr. Piers Markham will see that she is amply recompensed."

That was about the sum and substance of my first conversation with our new inmate, and, as it seemed, future comptroller of the

household, the Honourable Alethea Ramsay. So far, it was more satisfactory than I had anticipated at its commencement, as I found she was well disposed to establish peace and harmony—at least for the present—in our domestic relations. She was too much a woman of the world, to say the least, to cause discomforts in the family if they could be judiciously avoided—that is, with due deference to the interests of her sister—and through her—her own individual self. There was no occasion, therefore, to torment myself with fears of petty tyrannies, or annoyances arising through her residence amongst us.

My recent conversation with Miss Ramsay was not without certain effects, produced by the various images it had called up in my mind. Things about which before I had thought little or nothing, began to assume an importance in my imagination that was quite a novel experience in my life's history.

First, I reflected with some dismay that I had nearly attained the age of three-and-twenty!—

that I was five or six years older than Juliet—in consequence, no longer a mere girl, and that I ought, at this crisis of my life, to have some idea of its purpose and destination. Then came another chilling thought,—was I actually no longer *at home* in the old home?—was it only by Mrs. Markham's cold courtesy that I remained there?—was I really a burden upon means which were only sufficient for her own children, and hardly (it was inferred) adequate to setting Claude out in some profession which would be needful for his future maintenance in life—was it really true that all the family property, which Piers now ought to inherit from my father's bequest, had been so involved that what remained only sufficed to pay my step-mother's jointure? Could that be possible? And if so, by *whom* had the money been so squandered and spent? No doubt my dearest father's memory would be loaded with the odium of that reckless expenditure; and the debts and the difficulties would be talked of as incurred by him; and even had they been so,



to whom was it all owing? whose style of living, and demands of various kinds, so infinitely beyond the limits of that modest independence my father owned, had made the necessity of borrowing incumbent upon him to gratify her every whim, and draw upon himself an endless amount of trouble and vexation, that had not only helped to bring him to a premature grave, but the sad effects of which would, now with all their mortifying contingencies, be imposed upon my absent brother!

All these things I thought of, and wept bitter tears of sorrow as I thought how powerless I was: how utterly incapable either of averting the evil, or softening it when it fell upon those I loved best in the world.

For the first time since my father's death I thought with resignation upon his removal. I seemed to feel there was mercy and loving-kindness in the stroke that had taken him from evil to come, and removed him from a world so full of care to one where the weary are at

rest, and where no earthly cares or troubles could ever reach him more.

I then vainly speculated on what effect our family troubles would have on Piers. Would they harden him towards us all? Would he feel that all his future prospects had been recklessly destroyed—all that should have been his squandered to gratify the craving vanity and extravagance of a step-mother he never liked? What chance would there be in such a case of his making the desired provision for his brother and two sisters? Might he not most justly withhold all assistance from us, had he even the power of providing for us from other sources? Blameless as I felt we all were in the matter of the wasted patrimony that ought to have been his, and from which he might have made the requisite provision, still I felt that in looking to my eldest brother for a future maintenance we were calculating on that which, considering all the circumstances of the case, we had no right to depend. And yet I felt convinced, from Miss

Ramsay's communication, that Piers was to be held responsible for all that Mrs. Markham considered she was spending for her own children as well as for myself.

I knew we could not hear from him by the next mail, as Miss Ramsay seemed to expect—at least not in answer to the announcement of his father's death. He was living some way up the country, and his letters were at all times rather uncertain.

Meanwhile the time passed rather drearily away, though the summer was in the full height of its glowing beauty, and presented a strange contrast to the gloom within our house.

Mrs. Markham, after the first shock of her grief had passed away, with all the consequent excitement and necessity of exertion, had become strangely apathetic, and apparently indifferent to what was going on in her family. Having been assured her own prospects were safe, and her position at the Manor-house secure for the time being, she seemed to care

very little for anything else. She was always a selfish and self-indulgent woman, with an intense craving for excitement and gaiety. Being unable to gratify her natural propensities for the present, she was either gloomily silent and indifferent, or querulous and complaining as to the misfortunes which had befallen her. She had little pity or consideration for those who shared so largely in the family sorrow and bereavement; she even seemed to think but little of Claude's future prospects, or what the young man ought to be doing in order to fit himself for some profession. For present management she was content to look to her sister to take all trouble off her idle hands, so for the future she was equally satisfied to cast her burden upon the absent Piers, casually remarking—"If Claude settles to go into the army, his brother must buy him a commission. His poor father left everything in his hands; and you two girls, if you don't get married—of which I see no chance in this out-of-the-way place—he must

make a liberal allowance on both of you for remaining here. I am sure I don't know how we are to get on much longer without it. It is very hard upon me, having all the burden and weight laid upon me, of both families to maintain, and nothing but my small jointure, and my own little bit of money besides, to do it with. But we must get on, I suppose, as well as we can. Ah! how dull and sad everything seems now!—no one to take me out anywhere, or care how much I suffer left alone here!”

## CHAPTER VI.

I HAVE no doubt there was some genuine sentiment of grief in the midst of all these ebullitions of selfish sorrow on Mrs. Markham's part. She must have felt the loss of so tenderly indulgent a husband as hers had ever been to her; but she thought far more of herself, and of her privations in the enforced seclusion of that house of mourning, than of either of her children, or what their feelings might be.

Had she taken the trouble to make any observations at that time, she would have seen that Juliet was suffering much from the shock of the sudden announcement of her father's death, and from the unexpected presence of death in her childhood's home, for the first time brought

face to face with her. Naturally cold and uncommunicative, these feelings weighed upon her mind, causing a nervous depression that her mother was too self-occupied to observe. Claude's presence was the greatest boon to us just then; but I soon found that Juliet received more comfort—or imagined she did so—from the frequent conversations she held at that time with my cousin Luke Dillon. He was really no relation to Juliet, but being so near a one to me, it gave him the privilege of coming to the Manor-house at all times and seasons. He was extremely anxious—and I really believe from the best of motives—to “improve the occasion,” as he called it, to both of us. So there were few days in that lonely summer that Luke failed to make his appearance, and join Juliet and me, either in our wanderings in the garden and grounds, or else in the village visitings he urged us to re-commence as soon as possible.

I did not fail to tell Luke I held him partly responsible for Juliet's state of extreme de-

pression, from the manner in which he had made the announcement, that miserable day at Crofton Hall, and tasked her overstrained nerves to follow his exhortation afterwards. When I made this revelation to Luke, we happened to be alone, and I was struck with the gentleness with which he received my reproof; for I had no wish to spare his feelings, nor did I give him credit for very sensitive ones, I only begged him in future to be more careful of those of others. It seemed quite a new light to the young man, and he answered me humbly enough—

“Thank you, cousin, for your admonition. I fear I allowed my zeal to outrun my discretion. I will be more careful in future. I was thinking more of the soul than the body. I am grieved indeed to find I caused so much suffering to both.”

I observed, after that, that Luke's manner became gentler, and, after a time, he allowed himself to talk and walk with us without exhorting. We discovered, too, that the ascetic



Luke had one weak spot about him—a pastime he dearly loved, and one in which, but for his love of self-mortification, he would have more frequently indulged—and that was the “art of angling.” Luke never called it “fishing”—that was too mundane a term. When he indulged in the “art of angling,” he might have been a second Isaac Walton; and on that consideration, at rare times, he allowed himself a holiday for his dearly-loved sport.

Claude, too, could take part in his pastime then, and that drew those widely dissimilar young men together in the bonds of a common enjoyment. Juliet and I would often accompany them with our books or our work; and then Luke forgot the stand-aloof part he had set himself to play in life, and became for the time young, and almost cheerful. Sometimes we used to stroll home with him to my grandfather’s house; and Luke would continue in his self-oblivious state whilst he would exert himself, and bustle the old housekeeper about to get the tea ready, and go himself to pick the

freshest fruit for our repast, and become for the time being a mere mortal like one of us.

"After all," Claude would observe as we sauntered home, leaving the young clergyman to his meditations, partly pleasant and partly penitent, no doubt—"after all that Luke Dillon of yours, Marian, is not such a bad fellow."

"Indeed I hope not."

"Well, but," persisted Claude, "did you ever suppose it possible that you could take the stiffness out of him, so far as to go groping down in the strawberry beds, and then up in the cherry-tree, seeking what he could devour?"

"That is too bad, Claudie," exclaimed Juliet, with something like animation. "I am sure Mr. Dillon did not seek anything to devour himself; I know who took the lion's share of the cherries—it was you yourself, Claude!"

"No, was it? I had no idea I had been so greedy; but you did not see what he did up there, all by himself. Depend upon it, Mr. Luke took good care of himself."

"I don't think he ever thought about himself for a moment," said Juliet in reply.

"No? How can you tell that, Juliet?"

"I am quite sure of it," returned Juliet, with a little air of quiet decision that was rather becoming.

"Well, then, can you tell me *whom* he was thinking of, as you are so sure it was not his own amiable self?"

As Claude said this, laughing, I laughed also, and looked at Juliet; but she said nothing, though her colour rose a little. After a pause Claude again demanded—

"Well, have you settled that knotty point? If you don't know how to do it, I'll tell you—it is a problem worth working out; but, though it looks difficult, I can shew you an easy way of doing it. Now, listen and tell me—who got the most cherries?"

Juliet and I both laughed then, and she answered—

"You!"

"Ah! you may think so; and if I did I had

my own activity to thank for it, for they did not come in my direction—at least not intentionally; but I could tell you at whose feet they fell most frequently.”

“Well, who was the happy person?” I asked.

“*Yourself*, Marian. Now don’t ask me any more questions, my good girls, for the oracle is tired, and has nothing more to divulge respecting Mr. Luke Dillon.”

“I am sure,” said Juliet, drawing herself up, “no one wants to hear any more about him.”

“Very well, then, we are all satisfied; and now we shall have to run, as the dressing-bell is ringing, and neither mamma nor the Hon. Alethea likes to be kept waiting for her dinner.”

That same day at dinner Miss Ramsay asked—

“What made you all so late? I saw you rushing upstairs, Claude, long after the bell had rung for dinner.”

“I thought it was the dressing-bell,” Claude answered carelessly. Then, addressing Juliet

and me, he said—"It shows how pleasantly the time had been passing, does it not?"

No one answered, so Miss Ramsay spoke again.

"Of course I do not expect any young man to give an account of his time, or where he spends or misspends it; but I may ask these young ladies, I suppose."

"Oh, yes," said I. "We had been drinking tea at my grandfather's."

"And before that?—you left here at two o'clock—directly after luncheon, where did you go? Come, it is your turn now to speak, Juliet."

Juliet merely replied, "to the river," and looked down upon her plate. And then Claude said quietly—

"We went out fishing, if you are very curious, Aunt Alethea."

"Curious! No, my dear boy, I am never curious; but I do like young people to be frank. I hate mysteries, whether of old or young."

“So do I *not*, Aunt Alethea. I think a good mystery one of the most delightful and exciting things in the whole world; but it is so difficult to meet with a mystery worth finding out. If ever you fall in with one, Aunt Alethea—a real good one, you know—mind you make me a present of it—tell it to me before any one else. Now, will you promise me?”

Then Mrs. Markham woke up from a species of waking doze, and asked what nonsense Claude was talking; which he answered in his usual light, jesting way, and held the talk in his own hands till we left the dining-room.

Juliet walked out of the open window as soon as we reached the drawing-room, and Mrs. Markham settled herself in the corner of the sofa to enjoy a *bona fide* sleep; and I opened a book, intending shortly to slip away after Juliet. Miss Ramsay took up her knitting, as was her usual after-dinner custom, and seating herself by me, began—

“Pray did that dreary young man go fishing with you to-day?”

"My cousin Luke, do you mean, ma'am?"

"Of course I do. Young men are not so plentiful about here that there is much difficulty in fitting the right cap on the right head."

"Yes; he and Claude made an appointment together to go down into the hollows, where the ferns grow; and Juliet and I thought it would be a nice walk, and so we went with them."

"Yes, I see that Mr. Luke Dillon often walks with you and Juliet—besides going fishing with Claude."

"Yes, I think of late Luke has rather taken to walk with Juliet and me."

"More so now than he used to do formerly?" asked this pertinacious questioner.

"Well, really—I hardly can tell—we are so much more at home than we used to be; but I suppose he does come oftener," I answered with some impatience.

"Don't be angry, my dear. I am not questioning *your* right to walk with your own

cousin, but I consider I have every right to ask what Juliet is about—my sister is too overcome with——grief—(she might have said sleep)—to take much notice of what is going on in her family ; therefore it becomes incumbent on me, to whom she has delegated her authority, to know what Juliet at least is doing ; so I ask you frankly, according to my habit, does the young man come here after her—or you ?”

I felt very angry at this “frank” question ; but my conscience was sufficiently at ease to answer—

“I don’t think Luke comes here after either of us, in the way you mean.”

“In what way do *you* mean, then,” retorted the Honourable Alethea, turning her fierce eyes and brows upon me.

“You mean, I suppose, whether Luke is in love with Juliet or me,” I replied, laughing at an idea so preposterous and ridiculous. My laugh had a good effect ; she saw it was genuine, and so the eyes and brow relaxed



their inspection, and she spoke more pleasantly, saying—

“Well, I am glad to see there is no harm done at present; but I must look after Juliet a little. She is not a beauty, to be sure, but she is passable, and might be made more of—and she must marry well: so I cannot allow of any philandering in that clerical quarter. You see, my dear, what I mean,—for it is my nature to be perfectly open and frank in all I do or say.”

“Yes,” said I, “but there is no occasion for it in the present instance.”

“Ah, well—but there might have been. Mind, my dear, I am not saying anything against your cousin, and if you are disposed to like each other——”

“You give us leave!” laughing again.

“But you don’t seem much disposed to profit by it,” returned Miss Ramsay, smiling in her turn; then, as I continued silent, she asked—“Perhaps there is some one else in the way?”

“Indeed, Miss Ramsay,” I answered, getting angry again, “I do not see why you should persist in bringing forward a topic for which there is not the slightest call at present. If you are so determined to know all about what there is nothing to be known, I can inform you that I care for nobody, and nobody cares for me !”

“Frankly spoken, my dear! Well—though you are not so *very* young, you have plenty of time before you yet,—and I daresay you may, if you have the opportunity, marry tolerably well.”

“*Je n'en vois pas la nécessité!*” I answered lightly.

“No, there is no *necessity* certainly,” replied the spinster lady deliberately. “Many women never do marry—myself, for instance.”

“Yes—and possibly I may remain single too. As you have chosen to do so—cannot you imagine I may also?”

“Well, perhaps you may, my dear; but frankly I will tell you, I never had the chance

offered to me. I am between fifty and sixty, and I never had an offer of marriage—nor do I think it at all likely I shall ever have one now.”

“But you preferred remaining single?” I asked with a sort of pitying curiosity.

“Well, luckily I did—as I never saw the man I could like well enough to obey as well as honour; so it was all for the best. But you, my dear, are quite a different sort of person from me—more, I should say, in need of a protector; so it may be as well for you to marry some day. And you are rather pretty—not particularly striking, but quite pretty enough to make a good match, if you have the opportunity.”

I was quite thankful that, at that crisis of our conversation, Claude lounged into the room, and came up to the window where his aunt and I sat conversing. The discourse had become far too personal to be pleasant to me, and matters were not mended when Claude said to Miss Alethea—

“Why, what has given Minnie such a furious colour? She is like a red, red rose, instead of a white one this evening.”

“Ah! that’s it,” replied his aunt, laughing. “She does not like to hear that she is pretty.”

“Well, that must depend a little on who tells her so, I imagine. Now, come out with me, Minnie, and take a turn to cool your cheeks; and you shall tell me all about it.”

Very glad was I to profit by his summons; particularly, as it may be supposed, there was nothing to “tell” about it.

## CHAPTER VII.

AS we stepped out of the open window into the sweet fresh air of the summer evening, Claude only remarked—

“There, Minnie, you may thank me for that happy deliverance.”

He then took out a cigar, and we strolled on together in silence. It was getting dusk and darker as we walked down our pretty lime-walk; but there was light enough to recognize Juliet, as we reached the end of it, just coming through the gate which opened on to the fields beyond. She was out of breath, and seemed to have been either running or walking very quick, and she held a

large roll of music in her hand. She exclaimed on seeing us—

“I am so glad you are there. I do not like that dark walk by myself at this time of the night. I have been running, that I might get back before it got any darker.”

“Well, you see, we are here to protect you,” said Claude. “And now will you tell us where you are posting from in such a hurry?”

“Oh! I thought I should just have time to fetch this music. Mr. Dillon said he would look it out and mark it for me whilst we were at dinner, if I could send for it this evening. I knew Aunt Alethea would make a fuss about sending any one, so I thought it would not take me half an hour to go for it myself.”

“And why could not you send or go for it to-morrow in the full light of day?” asked Claude.

“Because Mr. Dillon is going out to-morrow to attend some meeting, and there was some-

thing I wanted to ask him; and if I put it off till another day there would not have been time for the choir to practise it before it was wanted."

"Very lucidly explained," said Claude, as we sauntered up the walk back to the house together. "But does it not strike you that it is rather—a—a—well, uncommon proceeding for a young lady of your years to be running off at this time of night to keep musical appointments with young men, or I should say *a* young man."

"What nonsense, Claudie!" replied Juliet, composedly. "I only went to the parsonage door for one moment; and it was Mr. Luke Dillon gave me the music."

"Well, is not he a young man?"

"No," responded Juliet gravely. "You must know he is a—*priest*!"

"A priest, is he? Well, I had always imagined he was a Protestant curate."

"So he is," said Juliet quietly. "But at the same time he is a Protestant priest, and

as such quite different from the common run of giddy, foolish young men—like yourself, Claude; though indeed, dear, I think you are very nice in your way.”

“But you think, I suppose,” answered Claude, laughing, “that Mr. Dillon is very superior in his?”

“Well, perhaps he may be,” said Juliet, with something like a sigh. “He seems always to be thinking of good things, and what everybody ought to do to make them better.”

“So he sent for you to fetch that music this evening, did he, to make you a little better?”

“No,” said Juliet gravely; “it was to improve the choir; he has taken a great deal of trouble to get it, and told me this afternoon that it was come, but he had two or three things to mark before we could have it to practise. That was the reason I decided upon going to fetch it myself.”

“Well, I would only advise your not



going again, that is all. Eh, Marian, what do you say?" he added, suddenly turning to me.

"I quite agree with you, Claude. I know neither your mamma nor her aunt would approve. Don't go to the parsonage again, dear, without me or Claude."

"I don't want to go again. I have got all I went for, and no one is the worse for it, I believe," said Juliet coldly.

I was glad, notwithstanding my little remonstrance,—given more in deference to Miss Ramsay's opinions than any misgivings on my own part—to see my young sister was rousing herself from the slough of her late despondency, to take some active part in what was going on around her. She was naturally musical—that we all were more or less—and the church-singing had always been from my poor mother's days an object of great interest at the Manor-house, as well as the parsonage.

Aunt Alice loved our village choir, and had

encouraged and raised it to a pitch of much perfection; and both Juliet and I had aided and helped in it as long as I could remember. The organ had been one of my father's earliest gifts to my mother, and during her life she with Aunt Alice had always played upon it.

The second Mrs. Markham, though very indifferent to church music, had never objected to any thing that was done in its support; and my father dearly loved the sacred chaunts and hymns that had so many holy and loved associations connected with them.

Juliet was a better organist than I. She had a firm finger and a fine touch, and managed all the mechanical difficulties, too, of the grand old instrument far more cleverly than it was in my feeble powers to accomplish. The vocal part was, however, more mine than hers; so we never clashed in our vocations.

It had been a great help to us when Luke came, with his fine deep voice, and a

love of sacred music that was, he considered, a part and parcel of his professional duties. But, whatever might be his genuine love for the art, it was never otherwise displayed. Luke devoted his talent entirely and conscientiously to the service of the church.

Thus it seemed to me but little strange that evening that Juliet should have gone in search of our new music—or even received it from the hands of the young clergyman himself. She was as innocent of any ulterior thought on the occasion as I was, who had never been there. But I began to gather from Miss Ramsay's "frank" expositions, as well as Claude's random remarks, that appearances, as well as intentions, must have a due share of consideration. I was old enough, perhaps, to recognize the expediency of that fact far more than Juliet, who was such a very girl; though with her tall figure and self-possessed manner she might have passed for being older than me, who was much shorter and slighter. She often also took the

lead when I might be deterred by my sensitive shyness from doing many things that Juliet would coolly perform and undertake as matter of course.

The Croftons happened to be absent at that time—we had not seen them for the first three months that followed my father's death. The usual forms of kind inquiries had been duly gone through, and a kind note from Mary received; but soon after our time of sorrow commenced, the whole family had left home on their usual yearly absence to the sea-side.

I was rather surprised when I missed them from the church on the first Sunday of their absence, as it was earlier than they were accustomed to go from home. A note from Mary soon after accounted for this. I may observe here, that Miss Crofton and I were the only correspondents; for, although Flora and Juliet had been, as it were, brought up so much together, from Juliet sharing constantly in Flora's studies, still it was understood they were never expected to write to each other. That was one

of Mr. Crofton's peculiarities. He had the greatest horror of young ladies' correspondence—I mean girls as young as Flora and Juliet. He had nothing to say against his sister sending me an occasional intimation of the family well-being, to which some short reply was as duly expected. I had a strange feeling about writing those notes. It was an occupation I both loved and feared. I knew Mr. Crofton read all my letters to his sister, and a word too much or too little, an overstrained sentiment or a coldly abrupt one, were all observed and commented upon afterwards, to my confusion. But at times, though very rarely—occasionally I reaped some little gratifying notice from his own pen, in reply to something he might have thought worth answering.

Mary Crofton told me in her note they had made an earlier absence from home than usual on Flora's account. She was about to lose her charming little governess, who was suddenly recalled home under peculiar circumstances; so, to break the pang of parting, which Flora felt with girlish

intensity, it was thought advisable to go from home—hence their early departure that year to the sea-side. Their return was abruptly announced by Miss Ramsay, who, notwithstanding her being so recently domiciled in our old home, seemed more *au courant* with all that was going on around than any of us. The manner in which it occurred was this: Mrs. Markham was sitting indolently looking over the contents of an old work-box, but not otherwise occupied, when her sister entered, brisk and busy as usual—fresh from a tour of inspection in the various outlying premises.

“So, Charlotte! I hear those neighbours of yours are just returned; some of their people came down here after some eggs.”

“Dear me!” replied Mrs. Markham, lazily opening her eyes, “have not they got plenty of their own—why should they want ours?”

“I can’t tell you—and I daresay neither Mr. nor Miss Crofton could either, for that matter—I only know the housekeeper sent down an hour or so ago to ask for some.”

“Well, I suppose you gave them what they wanted?”

“I *sold* them what they wanted,” answered the Honourable Alethea, with emphasis.

“I don’t think we sold any ever before,” said Mrs Markham, languidly.

“No—I daresay not. If you—or your husband, which is the same thing—had sold more and given less, you would not have been in the straits you are now, Charlotte—and you must see that.”

“How came the people there to suppose we had anything to sell?” asked the lady of the house languidly.

“Because I told them,” answered Miss Ramsay decidedly, adding—“I always like to be frank and open in all my doings. I hate underhanded ways, so a week or two ago—after you had put everything into my hands to do the best I could for you and your child—rent—I went up to the Hall—Crofton Hall they call it, I think—partly to look at the place, and partly for other reasons. So I intro-

duced myself to the housekeeper, and told her I was the late Lord Ramsay's eldest daughter, and come to stay here and manage for my sister, who in her widowhood could not be expected to look after things as much as might be desired, considering all the circumstances of the case."

"Really, Alethea," said the widow, slightly colouring, "I do not see what occasion there was to go and talk about one's altered circumstances to a pack of servants up at the Hall there."

"Nonsense, my dear—as if everybody there and elsewhere did not know all about your circumstances as well, and even better than you do yourself! And as for this old housekeeper, she is a good, comfortable person, quite devoted to the family she lives in, and having perfect faith in all their friends, because they happen to be such—one of the good old sort, in fact, that you rarely meet with in these days, except in out-of-the-way places like these."



“Well, then, Alethea, I suppose you went there to tell her everything here and about the premises is for sale!” said Mrs. Markham crossly.

“No—not quite that, Charlotte—but only at the dairy farm they might get things when their own happened to run short.”

“What did old Appleby tell you about the Croftons coming home, then?” asked Mrs. Markham, dropping the obnoxious part of the question.

“She told me she did not know when to expect them, as Mr. Crofton seldom settled things long before, or if he did, told people of his plans, so she should not hear very likely till just before they came; and this morning she has sent over in a hurry for eggs and chickens, as the family returned last night.”

“Well, I am glad of that, at any event,” said Mrs. Markham, brightening up a little—“it will be such a comfort to see a fresh face or two—some one besides you and the children, Alethea—and that horrid old lawyer,

Jackson, from Heatherfield. I suppose there is no occasion to deny myself when Mr. Crofton calls, as I suppose he will do to-day or to-morrow? Oh! Alethea, ought I to say 'Not at home' for the first time or two? What's the etiquette?—for I should like to do everything proper and respectful to poor dear Markham!"

"Well, such old friends, as I suppose the Croftons are, need not be treated like the world in general, Charlotte; but if you have any scruples, I can see Mr. Crofton and his sister, or any of them, without you the first time they call."

"Oh! I don't want to make any unnecessary fuss. I shall be very glad to see the Croftons, and as you say they are such old friends, it will be quite a comfort, as I tell you. So mind, Marian, when they call they are to be shown in here at once. If I did not tell her that," said Mrs. Markham, turning to her sister, "I know Marian would be running out to meet them, and, under pretence

of my not seeing anyone at present, take them nobody knows where! So you hear me, Marian?"

Of course I would only signify that I both heard, and was ready to obey. So we all remained at home, expecting our recently returned friends to call at their earliest convenience; and in due time they came.

## CHAPTER VIII.

I WISH I could give any correct idea of the old home. My impression of its peculiar beauties is no doubt a very partial one; and possibly, were I able to describe it, and the locality around, it might not convey the same charming image as that which is stamped in my memory, but which possibly owed many of its attractions to early habit and associations.

It was a very irregular and picturesque old mansion, built of the stone of the country, grey with age, and discoloured with the abundance of lichen and vegetable production which flourished both upon and closely

around its many-tinted walls. It was adorned with several peaked gable-ends, and with windows of various sizes and irregular insertion. There were an old garden and pleasure-grounds on one side, and an extensive fir plantation extending some distance behind the house, as well as on the opposite side, where it served the double purpose of a screen from the cold east and north winds, and also concealed the heterogeneous mass of stabling and out-buildings which were grouped together beneath its friendly shelter.

On the west lay the garden I have mentioned, with its yew hedges and wide turf terraces, and open to the south the old home stood revealed, in its picturesque grey and green garb, to the high-road, which ran a few yards below, separated by a narrow strip of meadow-land, bounded by a low stone wall, and two unpretending iron gates, which admitted all comers, by one common approach, to the old Manor-house.

We had moors and hills, also, stretching

away in the distance ; and in the midst of surrounding woods appeared the imposing-looking mansion we knew as Crofton Hall. That was the grand feature in our distant landscape, and the one to which as children we had the greatest pride in directing the attention of any stranger guest. As years went on, the instinct did not lessen in my eyes ; only the great charm then seemed to lie more within than without the stately-looking edifice. Our own more unpretending habitation was not, as I have said, a large house, neither did it boast a park, or even paddock of very spacious dimensions ; the long strip of meadowland was all that lay between our house and the high-road. There were a few grassfields beyond the garden, but the greater part of the land we owned ourselves was arable, surrounding the dairy-farm which lay midway between our house and Mr. Crofton's.

I imagine the Manor-house was of far earlier date than the Hall, which was built in that style called Elizabethan. The appearance of

everything within our house was as quaint and irregular as it was without. There was not a single room of any considerable size, though there were a good many of them, both up and downstairs. I never remember any alterations being made either in or out of doors. It was one of the few points on which my father took his own way in opposition to his wife's expressed wishes.

Mrs. Markham had been very desirous, from the earliest period of her residence at the Manor-house, to make various alterations and additions in and to the place; especially she was bent on the erection of spacious new drawing and dining rooms. Nothing, however, could persuade my father to gratify her in that one respect; he declared it to be his unalterable determination to preserve the old family place in exactly the same state in which it had descended to him through so many generations. He endeavoured also to convince my step-mother that he had good reasons, as well as his own inclination, to

urge for his refusal to comply with her wishes on the subject, telling her that any new additions made to the old building would have a most unsightly effect, and entirely spoil the picturesque effect of the whole. On the other hand, he could not consent to her other plan of enlargement by throwing two or three small rooms together, as the walls were so old and massive, and the timbers so connected with other parts of the building, that he dared not run the risk and peril of removing them, or making any of the alterations she proposed.

Thus the old home was left undisturbed, and no doubt many a sacrifice in other ways had been made to purchase a quiet concession on this point; whilst Mrs. Markham scrupled not to indemnify herself by various demands for the only instance of opposition she had ever met with from her too yielding husband in the whole course of her married life.

The opportunity now of exercising any



rights of ownership over the old place was passed away, for, though her use of it as a residence was permitted in the absence of the owner, she knew it was hers no longer. The often vexed question of how the place might be altered and improved, was, to my great relief, at rest for ever. It was a subject of deep though silent thankfulness to know that when Piers came home he would find that home unaltered—at least as regarded the old familiar features we both loved so well.

It soon became a matter of anxious speculation with me when that return so greatly to be desired might be expected. It was a great comfort when the Croftons came home, and I could confide all my hopes and anxieties to sympathising hearts and ears. I had never known Mr. Crofton so accessible and so easy to be spoken with. Mary was as usual all kind and generous friendship to those in distress. Mrs. Markham in her sudden widowhood was a person to be treated with

the tenderest consideration, whilst I, who was now doubly orphaned, seemed nearer and dearer to my friends than I had ever been before. Claude and Juliet, too, were made much of, and encouraged to come and go as suited them between the Hall and the Manor-house, in a manner that had been hitherto unprecedented.

Miss Ramsay was charmed with her new acquaintances, and they were soon made the repositories of her most inward thoughts and sentiments, with a degree of candour and frankness that sometimes quite took away my breath. I often wondered what Mr. Crofton thought of the Honourable Alethea; but the only opinion he ever expressed to me at that time about her was that it was fortunate for Mrs. Markham at such a crisis, to have her sister staying with her. I remember I drew a little rebuke upon myself for venturing to see home matters in rather a different light. I daresay I had been slightly spoilt by my friends at the Hall, and deserved the

admonition. I had been spending the day with Mary, whilst Juliet and Flora were amusing themselves after their own fashion, and we were thinking of returning home, when we beheld from the window Miss Ramsay escorted by Claude coming either to join our party at the Hall, or to expedite our return home. I suppose I exclaimed a little impatiently at the intrusion in the hearing of Mr. Crofton, as he raised his eyes from his book, and quietly asked—

“What is her offence?”

“Oh, nothing,” I answered, stammering; “only I had rather have walked home without her.”

“It is getting dusk, so I think it was a thoughtful attention on Miss Ramsay’s part. If she had not come or sent for you I must have seen you back myself.”

I dared not say to him, as I might have done to another and a younger man, that his services might have been dispensed with,

so I vented my little discomfiture upon Miss Ramsay by saying—

“She is so fearfully busy and active; she never lets anyone alone.”

Mr. Crofton replied—

“That is the very quality that makes her such an invaluable companion to Mrs. Markham, who seems quite unable at present to exert herself in any way.”

I was possessed by an unusual spirit of opposition that same evening, and made answer again—

“Mrs. Markham may find her constant interference pleasant and useful, but I really cannot say as much for myself.”

“Then,” said Mr. Crofton, laying down his book and looking steadily at me—“Then, Marian, let me, as an old friend, give you one little piece of advice. Determine to think more of Mrs. Markham and less of yourself, and then you will learn to tolerate a very active and useful member of your household.”

Mr. Crofton little suspected as he settled cozily to his book again how deeply that remark of his had wounded my sensitive spirit. I returned home that evening in a perfect fever of mind. I believe his object was to reconcile me to any little disagreeableness in our new inmate, by looking on the best side of her character, and to draw me out of a morbid spirit of self-contemplation, which he fancied only made me unhappy in myself and dissatisfied with all around, whilst he little knew or suspected the daily nameless worries of my home life at that period.

A circumstance, too, which was casually mentioned by the Croftons soon after their return home, was all in favour of Miss Ramsay's friendly advances. This was their having met, and become rather intimate, with a certain Mr. Ramsay, her eldest brother's son, who came yachting to the sea place where they were staying. Mr. Crofton spoke of him approvingly. He was not fond of young men in general, and seldom encouraged any degree

of acquaintance likely to lead to intimacy. But it appeared this Mr. Ramsay, though little past thirty, was a first-rate botanist, and fond of scientific pursuits in general: and was neither superficial nor frivolous in his acquirements. With this favoured individual, the grave, reserved Keene Crofton had condescended to make acquaintance, being accidentally thrown together when botanizing.

There was not actually much real disparity in the ages of the two men; though the elder of the two considered himself so immeasurably the senior of the younger, that they seemed to take their relative positions more in accordance with Mr. Crofton's ideas than the reality of the case warranted. Perhaps it might be Mr. Crofton, as the father of a grown up though very young daughter, felt, or rather estimated, his years so far in advance of the young man's, who was, no doubt, much struck with the extreme beauty of the girl, just then hovering on the enchanting border line that divides childhood from womanhood. Flora Crofton was, however, by no

means child enough to be unconscious of her peculiar claims to admiration. She had tact enough to keep her opinions thereupon to herself—at least as far as her father was concerned, and he believed, in all singleness of heart, that Flora was still a mere child, who required to be repressed or encouraged according to his own ideas of what was right and needful for her to do or say. Mary Crofton, I think, knew her niece rather better than her father did; but she also viewed her, more through the partial colouring of her own imagination, than in the sterner tints of reality.

Well, it seems the acquaintance with Mr. Ramsay was the one great feature of their late visit to the sea place, where they had been sojourning together for some weeks. It soon transpired, too, that this Mr. Ramsay was a nephew of Mrs. Markham's and her sister Alethea's, and they both gave very favourable testimony as to his merits of various kinds though it appeared they had neither of them the pleasure of enjoying any very intimate acquaintance per-

sonally with their nephew. Still he was a great personage in their estimation, for he was Lord Ramsay's eldest, indeed only son and he was already in possession of a considerable fortune, which he had inherited from his mother, who died soon after he was born.

"In fact," said Miss Alethea, "our nephew Allen Ramsay is in a position to marry any day he pleases, and I have no doubt any *one* he pleases."

I do not think at that time anything was suspected in regard to his admiration for Flora, except by her aunt, who happened once to mention it to me, in rather a doubting, hesitating way, saying it might be only her own fancy, and she was quite sure that Flora had not an idea of the kind. I was ashamed to express my private opinion to the contrary, against Mary's assertion, made in good faith; for I had observed Flora, though she never asked any questions relative to Mr. Ramsay, yet it was obvious to me she did incline her ear very attentively whenever he became the sub-



ject of discussion in our family circle. I asked Mary how they became acquainted at first, knowing how little her brother was inclined to make fresh friends.

“Oh!” said she, “we found Mr. Ramsay and his yacht the *Fairy Queen* in possession of the place when we went there; and for some time we kept at a respectful distance from each other, but as the place is very small, the few visitors there soon knew each other by sight, as well as their daily habits, and therefore I daresay whilst Flora and I interested ourselves in the outgoings and incomings of the *Fairy Queen*, admiring her in various ways, I have no doubt her master had learnt to watch for the beautiful eyes under the shady hat, that were so often—all unconsciously, I believe, then—looking out for its safe return into the harbour every afternoon, as wind and tide might permit. Well, Mr. Ramsay soon contrived to make himself known to Keene. I believe a rare plant he had brought home with him, or something in that way, was the medium of

introduction; and then Mr. Ramsay modestly recalled himself to Keene's recollection as having seen him some chance time, when he was here as a youngster. So that is the whole history of how it came about, Minnie. I can't say myself I recollected him at all as a youth here."

"I daresay you would not. I think he only came once years ago, and you know Mr. Crofton always kept out of the way of Mrs. Markham's large parties—relations included."

"Well," returned Mary, "they are very good friends now, and it seems to me there was a little incipient something on the young man's part, rather more than friendship, towards some of our party. Not that there was the slightest mention of any such *penchant* on his part, or, I verily believe, suspicion of it on Flora's. Pretty as she is, and, of course, knowing it, I do not think any idea of the kind has yet entered her head."

"What is this Mr. Ramsay like? He does not resemble his aunt Alethea, I hope?" I asked.

“No—that is, not at present. There may be a sort of family likeness, for Mr. Ramsay is dark, and rather too massive and square-built for a young lady’s fancy; but there is nothing against him, if Flora, in time, happens to like him.”

“Then I suppose you expect him here?” I asked, wondering.

Mary’s reply was very decisive.

“I thought you knew my brother better than that, Minnie! Nothing short of a proposal and engagement would ever induce him to take such a step, especially to help or forward any such intention.”

“Then how are they ever to know or like each other better?” I asked.

“We must leave that to fate—or at all events, to the gentleman’s sagacity,” answered Miss Crofton, smiling, adding, “It is not for us to devise ways and means for bringing about anything of the kind. Flo is so young, and has at present seen so little of anything in the world, that I should be sorry if she en-

tered precipitately into any engagement, however advantageous for her, and I think it will be a struggle for her father whenever the time does come. I am quite sure if ever he thinks of Flora as marrying, he considers the day is far distant, and the last thing he would do would be to raise a finger to bring it about. So well as he liked Mr. Ramsay, there is little chance of Keene's asking him to Crofton Hall."

## CHAPTER IX.

ABOUT this time the anxiously-expected letters arrived from my brother Piers in India. They were written in answer to those announcing my father's death, and the various responsibilities he had inherited with the family estate. I read mine breathlessly, looking for the hoped-for tidings of his speedy return, which, as far as I was concerned, involved so much in every way.

I fear there was a large leaven of selfishness in my cogitations just then. It was so pleasant to think of Piers coming back and taking his rightful place amongst us, as master of the old home. Only let his supremacy there

be fully established, I had no fears of further annoyance on the part of Miss Ramsay ; though I confess it might have been hard exactly to have defined in what her great offences consisted towards my over-sensitive self. There are few people, however, who do not know the perpetual small worries that are so keenly felt from the constant presence and interference of such a person as I have imperfectly described her to be, one who, like her, supposes frankness and candour to consist in the absence of all delicacy of feeling and that intuitive tact which is so necessary to preserve any degree of comfort and good understanding in a family party like our own.

Well, I felt sure the Honourable Alethea's reign was likely soon to come to an end. I did not enter into many speculations regarding Mrs. Markham. With all her faults and shortcomings, she was my father's widow, and the mother of Claude and Juliet, both of whom I loved dearly, and felt persuaded that Piers would do the same, when we all made one

household together; for I did not wish to think that, in the case I was supposing, Mrs. Markham might not care to remain when she was no longer the sole controller of the old home, as she had been in my father's days, but as I felt she would be no longer when Piers held the reins of government in his own hands.

I might, however, have spared myself the many speculations that rushed through my heart and mind as I gazed upon my brother's well-known handwriting, and dallied with the seal preparatory to making myself acquainted with the contents.

The last line was read—the sense of the communication established in my understanding—and then a feeling of blank disappointment stole across my mind, and tears sprang to my eyes, which soon began to fall upon the unconscious paper as I folded it carefully and restored it to its flimsy envelope, as if much depended upon the accuracy of its adjustment there. I was startled in the midst of

my sorrow by the sound of a voice which always brought some alleviation of that sentiment to me; and the words uttered were in a tone of some little anxiety.

“No ill news, I hope, Marian?”

“Oh! Mr. Crofton, I did not see you coming.”

I had taken my letter to enjoy its contents into the little plantation which skirted the two properties, and was used indiscriminately by the Hall people and ourselves.

“Well,” said he after a pause, during which I dried my eyes and tried to look as cheerful as I could under my disappointment, “I see you have got your much-expected letter, but I fear from your face the contents are not altogether such as you have been hoping to receive.”

“My brother writes to me that it is impossible for him to get away this year from India.”

“A year—only a year! That is not much at your age!”



“But it involves much more than that. Stay, will you read it, please?” said I, tendering my letter with a hand as shaky as my voice, though I did my best to steady both. But Mr. Crofton put aside my hand with something of an impatient gesture, saying—

“No—I never read letters that do not belong to me—I have quite enough of my own.” Then seeing my look of mortification, he added kindly—“Can’t you tell me at once all that concerns and interests yourself in that letter? For that is all I care to know, and I had rather hear it from yourself.”

The comfort inspired by those few words, enabled me to say with tolerable composure,

“Piers says he is engaged to be married!”

“Well, that, no doubt, is a reason that may very well account for his wishing to remain where he is till he can bring his wife with him. Anything else to cry about?”

I thought that inquiry rather unkind, especially if Mr. Crofton could understand how

I had been living upon the hope of having Piers, my only one brother, once more with me, to be all my own—and now he would belong to this strange wife, and never be mine exclusively again.

As I indulged these melancholy thoughts I kept silence, and my tears began to fall again. I retraced my steps through the plantation, and Mr. Crofton walked by my side. At last he spoke again,

“You have lived ten years contentedly without this brother. Why can’t you live eleven without making yourself so unhappy?”

“Because—” I answered, in a low, hesitating voice—“because this year is so different from any that ever went before it, and I had thought so much of Piers coming home.”

“Patience, patience, child! A year will soon be gone, and you will have two relations to expect, instead of one, when the time comes.”

At that I exclaimed—

“I don’t want two relations. I had rather

not have his wife; there is only *one* I want!"

"Ah! *you* want Marian! That is the way we generally look at our best friends' affairs; how they will affect ourselves."

"And is it not natural I should do so—and be sorry not to see Piers now?" I asked timidly.

"Well—I have no doubt it *is* a disappointment—but one you may have cause to rejoice over eventually. Of course you know nothing about your future sister-in-law?"

"Oh! no, Piers only mentions her name, Pamela Delcroix, the sister of a friend of his, and lately come to India."

"I know the name. Delcroix, I suppose, of the great banking-house in Calcutta?"

"Yes, that must be the same, for Piers mentions having relinquished his post in the country, and joined himself, and all he possesses, in some great business with Mr. Delcroix and his two sons; and that is how it comes, I suppose, that he is about to marry the daughter."

“Well, then let us suppose that Mr. Markham is doing well for himself in more ways than one—and that ought to console you, my little sensitive friend, for the postponement of your hopes of seeing him for another year.”

I could only sigh in reply. All my hopes were grievously frustrated, and I well knew no one could understand to what extent; but in discussing the existing state of things with Mr. Crofton, I insensibly felt my burden grow lighter. He said very little to console at any time, but I had often experienced how much he *did* for one in times of especial trial and sorrow. The mere returning back to walk home with me, when I knew from what he had said that he was going in a different direction, gave me a sense of protection and companionship that no words can describe.

Like many other of my pleasant experiences in life, it was destined to be cut very short; for on turning an angle in the walk, I descried a substantial female form bearing down full

upon us, which quickened its pace very visibly as it caught sight of me and my friend leisurely sauntering along.

A few rapid paces brought Miss Ramsay within speaking—at least, hearing distance; and she soon after joined us, taking the place, as far as space permitted, between Mr. Crofton and myself, that she might have the benefit, no doubt, of a double audience. She began—

“What a dance you have led me, Marian! I have been looking for you high and low—in every place but the right, it seems! And here you are quietly walking and talking to Mr. Crofton!”

“Yes,” said Mr. Crofton. “I was on my way to the new cottages by the lime pits, and happened to meet Miss Markham here; but I would have hastened her return if I had known what a serious state of alarm you were in on her account! You have not thought of dragging the pond, I hope!”

“Oh! Mr. Crofton, you may laugh if you

like, but the fact is, there are letters from India just come in. My poor sister has half a dozen lines from her step-son—I suppose they are meant by way of condolence; but she is in such a way, poor thing! So I left her to compose herself, and said I would go and find Marian, to hear what he says to her—if she has got her letter yet, for Jackson, the lawyer, who brought the packet over, said he had sent one to her, and did not know whether she had got it or not. Eh, my dear, have you seen your letter? Jackson seems to have got one—all full of business, it appears. I suppose yours is much the same?”

“What, of business, Miss Ramsay? Oh! no, he says nothing of the kind to me.”

“Dear me! Then you don’t know anything of what he intends doing for you and the younger children; for I find he says to my sister he shall not be at home this year, and he hopes she will make herself and all the family (he dashes *all*) as comfortable a home

at the Manor-house as circumstances may permit, until he returns—or she finds one to suit her better. He seems quite to ignore Charlotte's *right* to remain at the Manor-house during his absence. I frankly own I don't like the tone of this Mr. Piers Markham's letter."

In compassion to my look of distress, as Miss Ramsay began to open out on this futile subject, Mr. Crofton then said he must wish us good morning—as I was so well provided with a companion, he would proceed on his way: and raising his hat to Miss Ramsay, he was about to turn down a little side path that led in the direction of the cottages he was building, when Miss Ramsay, looking much disappointed, called after Mr. Crofton, begging him to stop for a minute, as she had something more to tell him. Mr. Crofton, on hearing this, stood still, with a resigned look upon his countenance, that made me smile, and waited for the next communication.

"Only think, Mr. Crofton, Charlotte had another letter. Guess who it is from?"

"Indeed, Miss Ramsay, that entirely passes my power. If you really wish me to know, you will tell me at once."

"Well," continued the lady, with considerable animation, "and we are going to have a visitor. Now, Mr. Crofton, don't you begin to suspect?"

"Indeed, no. I am very dull. You must speak plainly if I am to comprehend."

"Ah! frankly—yes, that is what I prefer always; so I will not mystify you any longer. The letter I allude to is from my nephew."

"Oh!" said Mr. Crofton, slowly, as if beginning to comprehend, "I think there is but one nephew I have the pleasure of considering as an acquaintance—Mr. Ramsay, of course. Oh! so you expect him here! Well, he is a pleasant, companionable young man, and I daresay you will all find him a very pleasant addition to your family party. Now I must say good-bye."



And with that Mr. Crofton walked deliberately away, without manifesting any of the eager interest that Miss Ramsay so fully expected to see displayed on the occasion.

We walked a few steps together, strange to say, in silence. At last she turned quickly to me, and said, looking attentively at my face,

“You know Mr. Crofton better than I do, Marian: now do tell me the honest truth, as frankly as I should tell you—was that display of indifference real or assumed?”

“Why should he not be indifferent, Miss Ramsay?”

“That’s no answer to my question; but do you suppose he is not aware of the object of my nephew’s visit, in proposing to come and see his aunt, and that it must be to see that Miss Flora again?”

“There would be an easier way, I think, of doing it, if Mr. Ramsay is really as much in earnest as you seem to think; and, after all, he may be coming to see you all, as it seems

he is coasting in his yacht, and not very far from this neighbourhood."

"Now, how did *you* know his whereabouts so well, my quiet little Miss Marian, may I ask?" asked Miss Ramsay, in a tone I particularly disliked. I had therefore satisfaction in replying—

"You were all talking on the subject of Mr. Ramsay with Mr. and Miss Crofton the other day, and I think it was Flora said something that he had mentioned to her about being near here, and perhaps he should come and look at his cousins, whom he had not seen since they were little children."

"If Miss Flora said that, it was not openly before her father, or he would have known better. I daresay it was when she was gossiping with Juliet."

I believe Miss Ramsay was right for once in that assertion, and so I said no more on the subject. It was not likely to drop, however, as I found Mrs. Markham, recovered from the effects of my brother's letter, and

very full of her nephew's communication ; but I did not fancy she appeared particularly pleased with the idea of the proffered visit—by no means as much so as her sister Alethea.

During dinner and after there was little else talked about. Claude seemed the best pleased, Juliet was indifferent, Mrs. Markham peevish, and the Honourable Alethea triumphant. My mood was not of much consequence ; it was composed of simple wonder as to what the Croftons would say and do, if Mr. Ramsay's visit portended as much as seemed to be suspected.

“It is all very well, Alethea,” said Mrs. Markham, languidly stretching herself on her sofa as we returned to the drawing-room, “but I do not see anything to make such a fuss about, as if it were any great honour Allen is about to confer on us. He has not been here for years, and now it seems he only comes to suit his own convenience, and not to see me.”

"Nephews don't often care much about their aunts," remarked Claude, with a total forgetfulness of Miss Alethea's relationship and his own manners.

Miss Ramsay, however, ignored the remark, as she could not blame the "frankness" with which it was made, and turned her attention to answer her sister by expatiating on what a good match it would be for Lord Ramsay's son, and how pleasant for them to be so nearly connected with the Crofton family, and what a great heiress Flora must be eventually. Mrs. Markham's reply was a very qualifying one.

"I have no doubt Flora will have a good lump of money one way or another; but you must remember her father is quite a young man still, and any day he may marry himself."

"Not he," said Miss Ramsay decidedly. "Mr. Crofton will never marry again; he has had enough of it already."

I was inclined to think Miss Ramsay was

right, and almost resented my step-mother's assertion as an unjustifiable liberty taken with Mr. Crofton to speculate on such a sacred subject—indeed, the idea of Mr. Crofton as a young marrying man seemed too preposterous to have entered anyone's brain but hers: so I dismissed the subject as quickly as I could. I heard Claude saying to his sister—

“It will be very jolly to have some one like Ramsay staying here. If we fancy each other, perhaps he will ask me to go a cruise with him. I do not remember him in the least, but I intend to like him if I can.”

Mrs. Markham caught the words, and remarked—

“It will be much more to the purpose his liking you, Claude. There may be some good in his coming here, if he takes a fancy to you.”

“Or, better still, mamma, if he takes one to Juliet,” replied Claude gaily; but his sister turned upon him with more than her

usual decision to desire him to confine his speculations (if he must needs indulge in any) to himself and his own concerns.

Claude, in reply, protested against such narrow limits being assigned to his imaginations, but at the same time promised penitently that he would take no more liberties with his sister's affairs, unless he saw fitting cause; and then, as Juliet wisely held her tongue, the subject ended.

## CHAPTER X.

WHILST this visit of Mr. Ramsay's was still in anticipation, our thoughts were for a time turned in a less agreeable direction. That was, in endeavouring to see our way through the midst of the family embarrassments, the nature of which began to be more apparent since the arrival of letters from India. Mr. Jackson came over with that he had received himself from my brother Piers. It was in answer to the one communicating to him the state of debt and general confusion of affairs in which the estate was found to be involved at my father's sudden death.

The worthy lawyer was now prepared with his instructions, and the family party (includ-

ing Miss Ramsay) assembled in due form to receive them. Mrs. Markham took refuge from her share of responsibility in declaring herself perfectly ignorant of all past debts which had, of course, to be borne in my father's name by the present heir. She saw fit also to bewail her own fate in the slender provision which had, she said, been made for her by her husband, and the responsibilities that had fallen on her in regard to her own two children, whose maintenance had still to be provided for, as well as the means to enable her son to follow out some profession, failing the funds, to enable him to continue at college. Mr. Jackson listened respectfully whilst Mrs. Markham rambled on in her usual style, but it seemed without being able to arrive at the drift of her discourse or understand correctly what were her exact wants or wishes. Miss Ramsay then threw the weight of her eloquence into the scale, observing,

“You can hardly expect my sister, under



present circumstances, to have the energy necessary either to stand up for her own rights, or those of her children; and this Mr. Piers Markham, in keeping out of the way when everything here requires his presence, I must say is acting in a very—very—well—a very inconsiderate way. But perhaps, my good sir, he has left everything in your hands to do the best for the family and himself that you can?”

“To a certain degree Mr. Markham had placed that confidence in me,” returned the lawyer cautiously.

“Then,” pursued Miss Ramsay, “you must see how imperative it is that an instant allowance be made to Mrs. Markham for the family maintenance, and a sum assigned her for keeping up the family place.”

A half smile flitted across Mr. Jackson’s stolid countenance as he replied,

“I am afraid I have no instructions to enable me to do one or the other.”

Mrs. Markham covered her face with her

handkerchief and sobbed aloud Juliet looked half frightened, as if something terrible were to be apprehended; whilst Claude, with a glow upon his handsome face, addressed the lawyer, saying—

“I am not enough of a business man to know much about the present matter, or why my mother is so much annoyed exactly. However, I gather that Piers finds he has enough to do for himself, without providing for his brother and sisters. Now, as regards myself, I beg to say I wish to be beholden to no man, brother or not, and if any one will put me in the way of earning an honest livelihood, I will do my best for myself and my sisters also, if required. I think I understand my mother is provided for?”

“Yes,” answered the lawyer; “and considering the impoverished state of the family finances, I should say very handsomely, too.”

“Indeed I am very thankful to hear it,”

said Claude quickly, with a look of great relief.

“Oh, nonsense!” gasped Mrs. Markham hysterically, “wait till you know what you have to be thankful about. My present income is next to nothing after what I have been used to. I have this great house to keep up, without any additional means from your brother to do it, and he throws all the burden of supporting you all upon me. But, if I am to do it, he shall pay for it, as your poor father intended he should.”

“Very good, very good,” murmured the Honourable Alethea approvingly; and was about to endorse her sister’s opinions by some pertinent remarks of her own when Mr. Jackson waved her a little aside, and took up the speech himself, saying—

“It seems in this case, as in many similar ones, a great deal of misapprehension prevails with some uncalled-for feeling towards the present proprietor of the property, arising entirely, I believe, from an erroneous view of

the state of things, as well as Mr. Markham's own position."

"I suppose we are not mistaken," said Miss Ramsay, at last making herself heard, "in looking upon Mr. Piers Markham as inheriting his late father's property? And I believe, from what I have been told, that his father expected him to pay a certain fortune out of the property to each of his other children when they came of age; and in the meanwhile to be responsible for their maintenance."

"Perhaps," replied Mr. Jackson, quietly, "perhaps Mrs. Markham is not aware of the extent to which the property is involved, or that she has for many years been living at double the amount of any income arising from it. There is therefore a very small surplus arising from the receipts, after Mrs. Markham's jointure is paid and the interest of the debts. You have had, madam," he continued, pointedly turning to her, "a very large share already of the family property; and it is Mr. Piers Markham's intention to

put the estate to nurse, and to pay off every encumbrance before he can talk about making provision for his brother and sisters. I have no doubt he will in due time do all in his power; but at present he has *nothing* to reserve from the estate—all it produces is in your hands, madam: it therefore rests with you to supply the deficiency. You have also the house during his absence, with all its appurtenances, for the benefit of yourself and family.”

Mrs. Markham sobbed a little more, and then remarked, behind her handkerchief,

“But nothing to keep it up upon! Mr. Piers would take that into consideration if he had any generosity.”

“Madam,” said the lawyer, somewhat sternly, “Mr. Markham must be *just* before he is generous; and he has heavy debts on the estate to pay off before he will receive a farthing from it. He had little idea till he received the accounts lately sent him of the frightful extent to which it is involved!”

“Oh! dear,” sobbed Mrs. Markham, “I hope he does not blame his poor father.”

“Not for a moment, madam. He knows how self-sacrificing he was by nature, and how simple and unostentatious in all his tastes.”

“Well, well,” said Miss Ramsay, coming to her sister’s rescue, “there is no use in dwelling on the point, or, as they say, ‘crying over spilt milk.’ What’s done can’t be undone. I have heard poor Mr. Markham always hated business, and left everything in—in other people’s hands, so no wonder affairs look a little awkward now. But if there is nothing forthcoming out of the estate, why, of course people must wait till something turns up for the better. Besides, we all know, Mr. Piers Markham must have made lots of money in India, and I daresay will consider his father’s widow has the first claim on his consideration.”

“I fancy,” said Mr. Jackson, “that he is likely to consider his wife, that is to be, in the first place; and I do not know that he

has as yet made the large fortune you expect. I believe he has lived expensively hitherto—the situation he filled required it; and now he has given it up, his wife will no doubt expect to live in a style suitable to her pretensions. It is of course a disappointment to Mr. Markham to find his English resources have failed him entirely at such a crisis; but I hope by rigorous attention, and present economy, as to the outgoings of the estate for a few years, to be able to pay off some of the encumbrances, and give its owner a suitable return.”

“And in the meantime his brother and sisters are to starve!” exclaimed Mrs. Markham, petulantly.

“I hope not, madam, seeing you have the power to prevent it,” returned the lawyer, shortly.

At length, when there was nothing more to be said on either side, Mr. Jackson prepared to take his leave. He seemed to think it only fair and right that the widow having

lavished the family property so recklessly, whilst she had the power of doing so, and having still a handsome share of it secured to her, might very justly support her own children—at least, for a certain time; and also find a home for her husband's daughter in the house which by rights belonged to her own brother. Mrs. Markham, however, seemed to think otherwise, and to be extremely disappointed that no further funds were forthcoming. She had, it seems, reckoned much on what Piers might be able or willing to do for the family.

The actual state of things, as revealed by Mr. Jackson, seemed for a time to arouse her out of her apathy, and to excite feelings of extreme irritation against Pier, in which his sister was to a certain degree included. Miss Ramsay, to do her justice, when she found that nothing was to be got out of Mr. Jackson, and that anything Piers might do for his father's children was entirely prospective and contingent upon the resources of the im-



poverished estate—when all this was made patent to her comprehension, she took the wiser part of making the best instead of the worst of existing circumstances, and seemed disposed to look cheerily upon our impoverished prospects, saying that everyone knew there was a great debt somewhere, and, of course, Mr. Piers was the person to pay it; and, as it seemed to be so much larger than was apprehended, why, it would take the longer time to do it, and, in the meantime, Mrs. Markham must do the best she could for her children; and, for her own part, she was ready to afford them all the help in her power, by overlooking things: and she hoped Mr. Jackson would represent to Mr. Markham what a sad change it was to her sister, and all the family, to live so differently to what they had been used to do in his father's lifetime.

I do not think my brother's lawyer seemed as much impressed with Miss Ramsay's representations—which she eagerly recited, de-

taining him to listen to her view of things and of the family privations—as she intended and expected he should be. He seemed to think, indeed, that Mrs. Markham had been more lucky than she deserved, in having so much secured to herself, as it was through her extravagance that the childrens' fortunes were dissipated—at least, for some time to come; and, even then, must entirely depend upon their brother's self-denial and generosity. All that they ought to have had was irrevocably squandered and spent.

When all that was made quite evident, there was no more to be said. Mr. Jackson had nothing further to do with Mrs. Markham than to see that her jointure was regularly paid; and having made arrangements with her for that purpose, he took his departure, and left us all to digest his intelligence with what appetite we might.

My brother had, in his letter to me, enclosed an order for fifty pounds, with a kind consideration as he said for my personal ex-

pences. With Indian ideas of liberality and hospitality he had never for a moment thought of making any provision for my living on in the old home. He never supposed it possible that my step-mother would expect any remuneration on that account. Nay, he would have thought, under the circumstances, that it would have been an insult to have offered it to her. I had, however, become wiser in my generation; my perceptions as to things at home being greatly enlarged, for which I was indebted to the "frankness" of Miss Ramsay's remarks and revelations.

I felt, therefore considerably perplexed as to what it was right to do with this small accession of fortune. I needed it for many little things, both as concerned my own wants, and also of those to whom I had, through my father's liberality, been accustomed to minister for many years. He had always made me an ample allowance for my dress and private expenses, without any reference to his wife, and the same had been always given me by

my father himself. Since his death I had received nothing. My mourning had been provided for me, with the rest of the family, but it never seemed to occur to anyone that I was destitute of funds for the supply of anything further that I might require. It may therefore be supposed that my brother's gift was welcome indeed. The only drawback I experienced was from the feeling of how far I was justified in keeping such a sum to myself for my own immediate necessities. I said nothing to anyone at home on the subject. It was one I did not care to name to Claude or Juliet, and I felt too sure that if I mentioned my acquisition to Miss Ramsay, she would have had no scruple in confiscating the whole sum, and placing it in what she called the "family purse," whilst Mrs. Markham would, if less exacting, have indulged in various reflections on my absent brother's partiality, who could send money to one sister whilst he ignored the equal claims of the other.

No doubt Mrs. Markham would have thought it expedient that I should divide my gift with Juliet. I was only too ready to let her reap the benefit of it, in my own way; but my whole heart rebelled against doing so at Mrs. Markham's dictation. I determined, therefore, to call in my dear old grandfather to my aid, and ask him whether he thought I ought to hand over the half of Piers' present, to be placed by Miss Ramsay in the aforementioned "family purse," or whether he thought, under all circumstances, I should be justified in keeping my brother's gift for my own necessities and those of my poorer neighbours around.

It never entered my thoughts to consult my friends the Croftons on such a subject. I had a sort of jealous dislike to the mention of money in their presence, still less referring to anything of debts and difficulties, in our want of it and imprudent management of the same in bye-past times. They were so rich themselves, so above all pal-

try and small considerations, that, in my girlish pride and sensitiveness, I could not bear the idea of bringing any of my own troubles, or those of my family, on that head before them. If they suspected or knew of our present embarrassments, well and good—it was not to be helped—but they—the money troubles—should never if I could help it come into discussion between me and my friends.

I found ere long that there were others who thought very differently from me on that subject.

I walked with Juliet that day as far as the church; and then, while she was busy practising with, and teaching her choir, I proceeded on by myself to the parsonage. I found the old clergyman sitting as I expected after his early three o'clock dinner in the window of his little dining-room, preparatory to taking his evening stroll through the village, when it was his custom to visit his sick parishioners, and drop in for a little friendly chat with

others whose habitations he might chance to pass on his daily rounds.

There was always a cheerful welcome for me at my grandfather's, and I was glad to take my accustomed seat on a low stool at his feet, with my elbow on his knee, when he would often stroke my hair with his withered hands, and tell me how like it was to my dear mother's, and how much I resembled her in every respect. I could not help feeling how greatly I was indebted to his partial fondness for that assertion; nevertheless, it was very pleasant to hear him say it, and believe it, too!

"Well, dearie," said the good old man, when I had laid before him the sum and substance of my doubts and difficulties, "I gather from what you say, that if you continue to live with your step-mother you will be expected to contribute your mite to the family purse?"

"It must be a mite indeed, grandpapa; and a very uncertain one, too! All depend-

ing upon Piers' generosity. Then what do you advise about this fifty pounds? I really want some part of it, and I feel ashamed to offer a few pounds to my father's widow for my privilege of living on in the old home. I cannot tell you how such sordid proceedings go against my feelings in every way."

"Don't talk nonsense, dearie, if your means are small, you must bring down your ideas and feelings, too, to their level. There is nothing sordid in that, and don't be over careful for the future. Whilst I live you shall have such help as I can give when you require it. When you don't want it, I am glad to have more to bestow upon those that do. You know I have not much to spare, and I think at present there are those who require it more than you do—*i.e.*, Luke, and my parishioners."

"Oh! yes, I know that very well, grandpapa, and I should have no hesitation in coming to you if I were really in distress. I



have as yet never felt the want of anything ; and now about this money ?”

“ Well, I think I should advise your putting half into the family purse, as you call it, and keeping the other for your use.”

“ I can’t offer such a paltry sum to Mrs. Markham. She will be sure to say something unpleasant.”

“ Then I advise you to ask her, or Miss Ramsay, if you prefer it, what would be considered a fair equivalent for your board whilst you remain with your step-mother.”

“ Dear grandpapa ! if you could tell how I hate the very idea of *paying* for remaining in the old home. I would much rather *give* my fifty pounds to Juliet and have done with it, or keep back ten for myself ?”

My grandfather passed his hand caressingly over my head, and then said, after a moment’s pause,

“ Perhaps I had better speak myself to them, love ; you belong more to me than anyone else now, especially as Piers is not

coming home at present. But mine is an old life, and I do not like to link your young one to it; so that, if you come to live with me here, in case of my sudden death, you would be thrown again upon Mrs. Markham's hands. That would not do; you must stay where you are for the present, or—or——”

“Or go out and seek my own living, grandpapa, as a governess, or as a work-woman of some sort, or perhaps as a servant. No, I dare not think of doing that, grandpapa—pray think of settling something less degrading for me.” \*

“There is no occasion, I hope, dearie, for anything of the kind; and if there were, you need not be degraded in the doing it. You know,” said he, with a kindly smile, “you may make any action fine by doing it in a right spirit; even sweeping a room, as old George Herbert tells us——”

“I should be very sorry to have to try it, grandpapa.”

“And I should be equally sorry to think

my Marian should torment herself about evils which may never come. But to come now to the practical part of the business. As everything now will be put upon a new footing at the Manor-house, it is the proper time for us to ascertain what may be Mrs. Markham's views in regard to yourself. It is always best to come to an open understanding on such points, and you will be more comfortable when all is settled. I shall write to Piers on the subject, who I am certain will be answerable for a moderate sum on your behalf. In the meantime, you can satisfy all demands from your present resources, and no doubt you will receive more by the time another payment may be required."

At this stage of our discourse, which seemed to me practical and reasonable enough (and I found was so, when acted upon afterwards), we were interrupted by the entrance of my cousin Luke. He looked pleased when he saw me, as he said, "looking quite at home," and proceeded to discuss parish matters with

his grandfather without much regard to my presence.

“Well, I must go now,” I said, interrupting Luke’s discourse.

“Ah!” exclaimed the young man, looking rather crestfallen, “I thought you were come to stay, as you are here alone.”

“No chance of such a plague as that, Luke. Grandpapa would not have me here to stay.”

“No, indeed!—why?” asked he hurriedly.

“Because I think, and she thinks too,” said my grandfather, answering for me, “that she is in the best place where she is, and always has been, at the old home.”

“I daresay she is,” said Luke, rather sullenly.

“And I should only be in your way here, Luke.”

“Perhaps you would,” continued he, in the same constrained voice.

“You are not very polite, my cousin, at all events. May I ask out of curiosity what harm you expect at my hands?”

“You might prove a snare,” he answered; and then added more pleasantly—“It is my business and office to work, cousin, and I feel more inclined to play when you come in the way.”

With that answer I departed satisfied.

## CHAPTER XI.

A FEW days after Mr. Jackson's visit to the Manor-house, and when the excitement consequent upon it was beginning to cool down, we were called upon to prepare for the reception of a very different sort of visitor. Mr. Ramsay wrote to announce his intention of being with us the following day. We had heard a great deal of him, in the meantime, from his aunt, Miss Ramsay. We were told of his reputation as a clever, even literary man, of the prizes he had gained at Oxford, and how he had kept up the fame he had gained there by his after achievements. We were also led to infer that he moved in the fashionable world in a higher orbit than his father's own

family, his mother having been of that grade herself. With her sisters-in-law, Lady Blanche Ramsay had nothing in common, and during her brief life her husband had seen but little of them. Her only child, the Mr. Ramsay of whom I speak, was brought up entirely amongst his mother's relations; and the only time that Mrs. Markham had ever seen her nephew was when, as a youth, he accompanied his father on the occasion of some shooting-party at the Manor-house.

As Mr. Ramsay had utterly ignored the existence of Mrs. Markham, in her frequent visits to London since, and had seen very little of the Honourable Alethea, who resided there, it is not to be wondered at that this proposed visit from their nephew was looked forward to with somewhat mixed feelings. There was, however, a generally recognized sentiment amongst the various members of our little household, that for whatever honour and glory might attend the advent of so important a personage, we were more indebted

to the vicinity of lovely Flora Crofton than to any of the ties of recollection or relationship.

The Croftons heard of his approach with great equanimity. Mr. Crofton seemed rather glad of the opportunity of again meeting his pleasant botanizing acquaintance, and knowing nothing of the state of family politics between the nephew and his aunt and cousins, seemed to think a visit to them at that time the most natural thing in the world. Mary Crofton appeared as little surprised as her brother, though she evidently placed something to the score of Flora's attractions, in the expectation of their new acquaintance's visit to his relations, as being their nearest neighbours.

Flora was charmingly indifferent, or wished to appear so; but there was a certain degree of self-consciousness to be detected when Mr. Ramsay's visit was first announced; and she overacted her part a little when she declared she knew he was coming into that desolate



part of the world because her papa had told him of several rare plants with unpronounceable names that were to be found on or about the moors.

Claude, who was rather fond of sparring with the lovely Flora after the manner of their childish disputes, took her up on the occasion, saying—

“Why can't you allow the poor man some singleness of motive when he says in his letter that, finding himself so near his relations, he would like to come and see *them*—eh, Miss Crofton?”

“Well, perhaps,” answered Flora, “he may have some natural curiosity that way. I never said he had not.”

“Curiosity!” returned Claude, rather piqued: “that's not the best sort of feeling to go visiting your relations with.”

“I never said it was,” replied Flora, provokingly.

“But why should Allan Ramsay be *curious*, as you call it, to see us, Miss Crofton?”

“Don’t ask me to account for Mr. Ramsay’s sentiments, Mr. Claude.”

“But I can’t help it, if you ascribe all sorts of motives to him for coming here.”

“Well, perhaps I have not hit on the right one yet,” answered Flora playfully.

“I don’t see there is any occasion,” persisted Claude, “to talk about *motives* at all in such a simple case as this.”

“Very well,” said Flora, “then we will say no more about it. Perhaps you will tell me all you think on the subject after Mr. Ramsay is gone. I daresay we shall not see him if he is here only a few days.”

But that was going rather too far in her assumption of utter indifference, even in her friend Juliet’s simple faith, as her “Oh! Flora, you can never think that really; and even Mr. Crofton said he should like to see Mr. Ramsay again.”

“Then papa can come over and enjoy the pleasure; it is no reason why Aunt Mary and I should.”

Claude looked doubtfully at Flora as she said this. They had made progress in their acquaintance by that time, but I think Claude had a distrustful feeling towards the beautiful girl.

"She is like a white kitten," he said; "I always expect to feel her claws when you are admiring her and playing most innocently with her."

"You *do* admire her, then!" exclaimed the staid Juliet, when Claude made this admission after a few days' renewed acquaintance. Claude willingly avowed that not to admire Flora Crofton would be a reflection on any man's taste.

I could not make out, though, whether he liked her as well as admired her. Sometimes I fancied he did not particularly fancy Flora, but that might only be when she was not amiable to him—as happened occasionally. At all events, their acquaintance, such as it was, ripened rapidly. Flora had no diffidence in her composition, and she evidently liked at times

to tease Claude; and of course he did not object to her indulging in that pastime, and, as she and Juliet were often together, it was not unusual for him to make a third, so she had frequent opportunity.

Luke Dillon was often with us also, and occasionally came out of his shell of reserve, though he had fits of frigidity and absence (both of mind and body). He seemed inclined, on the whole, to brave the "snare" he suspected our little social meetings might become, if he yielded too often to the temptation of enjoying them.

Our anxiously expected guest came at last. My own anticipations as regarded this fine, and as I supposed fastidious gentleman, were doomed to be entirely reversed. He was quite different from anything I had imagined him to be—a rather plain, but gentleman-like man; tall and large built, with remarkably quick brown eyes, not large, but penetrating, as if they looked through the person addressed; rather irregular features, judiciously

concealed by the thick dark beard and moustache; a manly looking person, but too broad built for perfect symmetry of form; he was said to be like his father and his family, except in the extraordinary beauty of his hands and feet, which he inherited from his mother. Altogether, we were all duly impressed with the outward looks of the new comer, though we considered his appearance was more imposing than prepossessing.

Mr. Ramsay was certainly very unlike his cousin Claude Markham. I have said that Claude was handsome—that he certainly was to no common extent, both in form and feature. He also was tall, but his figure was slight and graceful, as became his years, and well proportioned too, and giving the promise of future strength. Unlike his cousin, too, every feature of his face stood revealed in its classic outline, neither beard nor whisker hid anything of the perfect oval of his face; only a slight chestnut moustache marked the curve of the upper lip, and contrasted well

with the regular teeth beneath. The well shaped head, with its waves of chestnut hair, was poised at that angle which might in some people have conveyed an impression of haughtiness to the whole face and figure; but that sentiment was so strange to Claude, that the only effect produced by it was that of refined grace—and I might add graciousness, so kind and cordial was he, in spite of his little freaks and flights of fancy in which he indulged with perfect confidence in all around him. I found, however, that grand as Mr. Ramsay looked, he was remarkably plain in speech and manner; a quiet simplicity was the distinguishing characteristic of both. That was his general manner, for I soon observed, when anything was said or done which struck his fancy in any way, how the deep brown eyes began to kindle, almost to burn in their concentrated light. I would not have been the person to contradict him, or stand in his way when he was angry; and then, when animated, instead of

the quiet short sentences in which he generally indulged, how eloquent and how convincing became his speech! how well chosen were the words in which he clothed his ideas! how new, how apt, how clear did those ideas stand forth: whilst everything he said was full of instruction as well as imagination. He was at that time, no doubt, a most charming person, for he condescended to make himself pleasant to all around, as well as to the object of his peculiar admiration.

Lovely Flora might well be proud of her conquest, if, indeed, that man's mind and heart had already acknowledged the power of her youthful beauty. There was no occasion for any doubt on her part, that he might not care to resume his former acquaintance with herself and her family. There was little time lost in doing so. Mr. Ramsay appeared to make no secret of the interest he felt in renewing his acquaintance with the Croftons. He found both his aunts very ready to forward any plan that might add to his con-

tentment during his visit. Accordingly everything that tended to promote the intercourse between the two families was eagerly encouraged.

For a wonder there was no drawing back on Mr. Crofton's part; he met and responded to all advances on the part of our house, with corresponding cordiality and frankness. I looked on at first a little nervously, knowing how uncertain our good friend and neighbour often was in many of his moods, and almost fearing that we and our honoured guest might on some occasion be doomed to meet with something like a repulse to our overtures. No one, as I well knew, could be more kind and friendly than Keene Crofton when it pleased him; but I thought, if he chose to suspect either of us, or our guest, of any ulterior views in seeking the society of himself and his family, he might show his disapproval of such intentions in various ways, to our utter discomfiture.

I seem to be identifying myself rather



boldly at this said time with the proceedings of my step-mother and her family, and it is very true that I did feel part and parcel of the same just at that time, as far as concerned the younger members of the household, and was very ready to share in all the newly-awakened interests which the arrival of so charming a visitor diffused amongst us all.

Mr. Ramsay, too, was pleased to adopt me as a cousin quite frankly from the first; and, though Mrs. Markham explained I was in no ways entitled to the honour of cousinship with any of her family, he still pleaded that, through Claude and Juliet's relationship he might hope to be included in mine also. So in a few days there was a pleasant compact entered into that we were to be cousins henceforth.

Those were very happy days, and even now, looked at through a long vista of past years, I can recall something of the pleasurable spirit in which that autumn passed

quickly though quietly away. It was so new to have a fresh mind amongst us, and one to whom we all deferred and looked up, and yet essentially one of ourselves.

Mr. Crofton could hardly be that; he was too superior; he seemed to stand so far above us all, that there was always a certain mixture of awe then in regard to him even in our happiest relations. Now, whatever might be the superiority of Mr. Ramsay, whether in social position or mental capacity or endowments, it never obtruded itself upon the notice or conscience even of the lowliest and least appreciated amongst us. Without the slightest perceptible effort, without ever seeming to descend or to condescend, Mr. Ramsay won his way with us all. There were great diversities of mind and matter even in our little coterie, composed as it was of ourselves at the Manor-house, the Croftons at the Hall, and the Dillons in their small parsonage. But I may safely say there was no dissentient voice when the praises of Mr. Ramsay were said or

sung. If any one were less enthusiastic than the rest of our party perhaps it was Claude. At least he said less; perhaps he did not find him quite the "jolly companion" he might have set his heart upon. At all events, the two young men, the cousins, did not appear to have any peculiar fancy for each other's society. I do not mean to infer that they were not on perfectly friendly terms.

## CHAPTER XII.

LATE in the autumn that year we had a sort of Indian summer, that was particularly enjoyable in our northern climate whilst it lasted.

It was during its brief continuance that a little plan of pleasure was formed and hailed with unbounded delight by all the younger members of our little coterie. It chanced one day, when loitering in Mr. Crofton's grounds, that Claude volunteered, the weather being so fine and warm, to row us down the river in a small boat that was always moored close by on a sort of lake that was fed by, and at the farther end joined itself to, this same river.

We were to go down some distance to a wild picturesque spot near some ruins, and take our luncheon with us, and all things suitable for this impromptu pic-nic. Luke Dillon, being a good oarsman, was soon sought, and, after a little demur, enlisted in our party.

Mr. Ramsay declared he should enjoy the pleasures of idleness, or, as he said, comparative rest, and offered himself as steersman, begging Flora at the same time to sit and give him the benefit of her experience as to the intricacies of her native river's navigation.

Flora, nothing loath, complied with Mr. Ramsay's request, but, with the naïve coquetry which was part and parcel of her nature, made sundry charming little protestations as to her want of knowledge in that and most other things for which her lover was so ready to accredit her. Nothing would serve on the present occasion but that Juliet and I should also come and take our places close by, and thus,

as she declared, relieve her from all the responsibility Mr. Ramsay was so desirous of placing on her shoulders, at the same time shrugging those pretty shoulders with a charming air of helpless deprecation.

Everything Flora did and said was graceful and pretty; but somehow she occasionally provoked me; but that was only when her father was not present; she knew him better than to indulge in any of her little flighty moods in his presence.

I believe Juliet admired her friend with that intensity of girlish belief in her perfection that was almost as infatuated as a man's devotion to the object of his blind idolatry.

Mr. Crofton had excused himself that day from being of our party; but Mary was there, and she was never any restraint either on her young niece, or any other human being; besides, she had taken her sketch-book, and was thinking more of the passing lights in the sky than anything that was being said or done around her. It was very evident

Flora had no wish to flirt in private. She was always better pleased to have some of us young ones around her; perhaps that we might take note of the homage paid her, and as her attendants, be ready to help her out when she was tired of carrying on the conversation with her very devoted knight for the time being.

It was thus I became a hearer of all that passed that day between Flora and the man I felt sure would soon become her avowed lover. She seemed strangely at ease with him, and yet, I fancied, more proud of his attentions than touched to the heart by what might have charmed many a more experienced woman than herself. Flora chatted on, improving the opportunity afforded by the situation of drawing comparasons between the little river boat they were engaged in steering together and the beautiful yacht that owned Mr. Ramsay as its master, and then proceed to recall, with a sort of naïve and innocent delight, the few times she had

been on board, and every little particular connected with the two or three sails she had enjoyed on board the "Fairy Queen," and all things associated with the early days of their first acquaintance.

It may be supposed the part Mr. Ramsay took in all these reminiscences, whilst Juliet and I filled the roll of listeners with no uninterested feelings, till at last Juliet, carried away by her friend's enthusiasm, exclaimed how delightful it must be to have the power of seeing such a vessel as she described, and a thousand times more to have the pleasure of making a trip in it.

"Well," said Mr. Ramsay quietly, "you can command the pleasure any time you like. I shall be delighted to see you all on board the 'Fairy Queen;' choose your own time, and I will be in readiness to receive you there."

What was begun in jest ended in earnest, and a charming plan was that day formed, and in due time realized, of our all making a



party to go down to the little sea-port, about seven miles distant, where Mr. Ramsay's yacht was to be stationed. It was the nearest point where it could be brought for our convenience, and about ten miles from the larger watering-place where he had first met the Croftons.

Mr. Crofton did not disdain to join our party that time. The place was new to him, as well as to us all. Mrs. Markham made a special favour of my going; but we—that is Juliet and Claude and I—went by the special invitation of Mr. Crofton and his sister Mary to the little inn where we were all to meet and stay a few days.

Mr. Ramsay's share of the entertainment was in receiving us on board his own yacht. There, indeed, we found even more novelty of enjoyment than our utmost stretch of imagination had pictured. We all knew that it was to do honour to Flora that Mr. Ramsay thus exerted himself to give his obscure country cousins so much pleasure.

We were not the less grateful for it on that account; it seemed perfectly right and natural that the Croftons should take the lead—we were all ready enough to follow.

We were all happily good sailors, so there was no drawback to our happiness on the sea, as well as on land. Luke Dillon came over occasionally; he had received a special invitation to join us whenever he liked. When he did come, however, it seemed as if it were *malgré lui* that he made his appearance at all—more as if he came to inspect our proceedings than with any prospect or purpose of enjoying himself as we were doing.

“I wonder what Mr. Dillon comes here for?” said Flora, as we were sauntering one morning on the beach, expecting the gentlemen to join us preparatory to our day’s excursion in the yacht.

“Your father asked him,” was Juliet’s reply, given rather stiffly.

“Oh, yes! I don’t mean but that he is

very welcome; and we are all very glad of course to see him; but it seems to me, from what he said when he arrived this morning, that he had no particular pleasure in coming, but thought it rather a matter of duty—in fact rather a bore.”

“I am sure Luke never said or meant to infer anything of the kind,” said I.

In reply pretty Flora laughed a little, and shook her head, then said—

“I believe, Marian, Mr. Dillon is come down to look after *you*, and see that you are safe.”

“Is he? That is very kind!”

“Which means you don’t believe me, Marian. Now, Juliet, what do you think?”

Juliet stooped down and picked up a shell, and then, as she rubbed the sand away, said—

“I never thought about it.”

“He is afraid Mr. Ramsay is going to sail away with you, Marian!”

“Now, don’t be silly, Flora.”

“Now am I silly?” persisted Flora, turning

to Luke, who with Claude had just overtaken us. "Now, Mr. Dillon, I appeal to you; are not you come down here to look after Marian, and see no one runs away with her?"

Luke's sallow face flushed a dusky red, but he answered with his usual composure—

"I did not consider her in any danger: at least it never occurred to me to think——"

"To think what?" said Flora mischievously.

But Luke held his peace, and turned with some observation to Juliet; and as they strolled away I heard Claude say to Flora—

"I think I can answer as regards Mr. Ramsay."

"Nobody asked you," replied Flora with a little pout.

"I think," pursued Claude, "there is only one person in danger of being carried off by Allen Ramsay."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Flora. "And suppose she does not intend to be carried off?"

“In that case I will believe anything, however wildly improbable, that may be told me for the next ten years to come !”

“How dare you make so sure of anything—that—that—you know nothing on earth about ?” retorted Flora, half in anger, half in the spirit of coquetry that was so natural to her, and made her, no doubt, very bewitching in the eyes of her admirers.

Claude, however, only smiled, but made no answer ; so we walked on in a sort of uneasy silence till we were joined by Mr. Ramsay himself and Mr. Crofton. Then Flora began talking hurriedly to Claude, who, being detained at her side by the necessity of answering, made, as I believed, an unwilling third with Mr. Ramsay, who took his usual place by Flora until they arrived at our usual place of embarkation.

I found Mr. Crofton peculiarly genial and kind that morning. I fancied Mr. Ramsay had been saying something that pleased him on their way. He fell back when Mr. Ramsay joined his

daughter, and looked after Claude as if he expected him to do so also. Then with an absent smile he said to me as he looked after Claude—

“What does that youngster mean to do?”

The question was so abrupt and irrevalent except to his own thoughts that I hesitated a moment, hardly knowing whether he referred to his present position or his future prospects; but I answered as to the latter, being by far the most important.

“I can hardly tell you; it is a question of rather anxious consideration just now. I fancy he would thankfully accept any situation that would afford him a prospect of future maintenance.”

“Ay—indeed! Well, we must see about it. Come, let me help you into the boat.”

## CHAPTER XIII.

AND so we went sailing—that day and many succeeding ones; for our few days lengthened into a whole happy fortnight. And then our Indian summer came abruptly to an end, and it became cold, raw, and most uncomfortable; and it was evident to all that our pleasure-seeking-and-finding trip was come to a natural end, and we must be returning to our respective homes.

The very morning that we were to depart, whilst we still lingered by the sea-shore, we were surprised by the unexpected apparition of Luke on his shaggy pony approaching the hotel just above us on the cliff. Whilst we all indulged in various merry speculations as

to the cause of this movement on Luke's part, the reason which brought him was soon made known to the person it chiefly concerned.

He was the bearer of a despatch which had been brought from London that day by a special messenger to Mr. Ramsay, expecting to find him at the Manor-house. And Luke, happening to be there at the time of his arrival, kindly volunteered to bring it on, whilst the man rested and refreshed himself, and as being so much better acquainted with all the intricacies of the road to the remote sea place where Mr. Ramsay was staying. We had no telegrams in our part of the world at that time; so this letter had been written and sent by an aunt of Mr. Ramsay's (the Lady Percival, his mother's sister, and who had stood almost in that relation to him in the early part of his life). This letter gave a brief but lamentable account of a serious accident that had befallen Lord Ramsay whilst riding a new horse. He had been thrown and very seriously injured;



the worst consequences were apprehended; the messenger had orders to find Mr. Ramsay, should he have left the Manor-house, wherever he might be, that no time might be lost in his coming home. I did not see the parting between Mr. Ramsay and any of the Croftons, nor did I, or either of his cousins, intrude ourselves upon him to say good-bye. Neither was I curious to observe what effect her lover's sorrow and sudden departure might have on Flora.

The only feeling I can recall to mind was that of regret at such an untoward ending to our happy sea-side visit, with a vague idea that we should only find sorrow on our return home, and that Mrs. Markham and Miss Alethea would feel themselves deeply affected by this family misfortune. I even speculated on the chances of one or both of the sisters being gone in the same direction as their nephew. I intimated as much to Juliet and Claude as we drove through the gate which opened into the little paddock in which the house stood.

All such notions were, however, speedily put to flight by the sight of Miss Ramsay herself, who met us in the hall and began exclaiming the instant she saw us, upon the tidings which had been communicated to them also by the messenger. She was evidently disappointed not to see Mr. Ramsay with us. She thought he might have returned to tell her and her sister all particulars contained in his letter. Besides that, he had left a servant and various other possessions at the Manor-house.

“We are to send his man and things after him,” said Claude in answer to his aunt’s interrogations. “He started immediately after saying a few words to Mr. Crofton; he was the only person I believe Ramsay saw, and gave instructions to.”

As to the idea of either of the sisters leaving home at that time, it seemed never to have been for a moment entertained.

“What should we go for?” replied Miss Alethea, when Juliet mooted the subject. “Your cousin’s man, the messenger I mean, says his

lordship has been insensible ever since the accident, so he would not know us if we did go : besides that, you may be sure Lady Percival will be there, and I do not care to put myself in the way. I never could like her, and Ramsay thinks there is no one on earth equal to her. It is very sad indeed, this bad accident of my poor brother's, but I do not see that I could do him any good by going there—considering the expense of the journey and all that : besides, if he gets better and recovers his senses, your cousin will know well enough where to send either for your mother or me, if we are wanted ; but my impression is that we are not."

Miss Ramsay's view of the subject seemed to be conclusive, and no more was said as to the chances of Lord Ramsay's desiring the presence of either of his sisters. As it was, it appeared he was not in a state to recognise them ; had they gone and if he had been, the question might have arisen of how far he would care for the presence of those of whom

he had seen so little during their past lives. I asked Miss Ramsay who the Lady Percival was, to whom she had alluded as likely to be with the Ramsays on such an occasion.

“Oh, have not you heard of her? She is the only sister of his wife. I mean poor Ramsay’s wife, who, you know, was Lady Blanche Langley. Well, Lady Percival was the other sister, and after Blanche’s death she took charge of the boy. I always disliked her as Lady Emma Langley—not that we ever saw much of each other; and as Ramsay chose to prefer his wife’s sister to his own, why of course there was nothing to do but leave the coast clear, and make oneself as scarce as seemed to be desired.”

“I see,” said Claude smiling; “and I know my mother was never asked to stay at Lord Ramsay’s house when visiting in London.”

“Well, let bygones be bygones,” returned Miss Alethea amiably; “it seems we are likely to see more of the young man than we did of the old, though he was our brother. I suppose

Allen has proposed to Flora Crofton."

"If he has, he has not told me," returned Claude, as he turned away.

"Do you know anything about it?" asked Miss Ramsay of her niece.

"No," said Juliet, "nor do I think there was anything to be known as yet; of course we all saw how much he admired Flora, and did everything he could think of to please and amuse her; but I am pretty sure he had not asked Flora to marry him, or she would have told me: and then he went away in such a hurry, and had such different things to think of. We were all so sorry for him, but we did not see him to tell him so, and he was gone almost before we knew why he had been sent for."

"Then I daresay," chimed in Mrs. Markham from her distant sofa—"Then I daresay no one thought of getting him to promise anything about poor Claude!"

"My dear mother," said her son hastily, and with a slight flush on his cheek, "Mr. Ram-

say had other and much more important things to think about!"

"Mr. Ramsay, indeed! You forget he is your cousin, Claude, and that you have a right, under the circumstances, to expect him to do something for you," returned his mother with an air of decision.

"What circumstances do you allude to, mother?" asked the young man.

"What circumstances? well, the present circumstances—oh, you know very well what I mean—the circumstances of his coming here to stay, and making a sort of convenience of being at our house."

"I hope, mother, you are not going to ask something for me by way of compensation!"

"How you talk, Claude; as if I did not know better than that! But what I mean to say is, he must know you are likely to be poor, and he will be very rich—and as he has chosen to come and stay here and make himself so intimate and all that, he is bound to get you some nice little place, which will be

easy enough for him to do—and natural enough, seeing you are his cousin, and you have been now so much together, I may say such friends——”

“Mother,” said Claude, dropping his usual jesting tone, and speaking quickly and seriously—“You are mistaken there. Mr. Ramsay and I are not on the terms that makes us friends—any more than we are equals—though we are related in the degree you mention.”

At this speech of her son's Mrs. Markham rose up from her recumbent position, the better to study her son's countenance, exclaiming,

“What *do* you mean, Claude? Surely you have not been so foolish as to quarrel with your cousin! Not friends, indeed! What folly have you been committing! Pray what should make you enemies?”

“Nothing that I know of, mother; you have jumped at a conclusion I never dreamt of. I only meant there was no intimacy of friendship between us. He looks upon me as a raw youth compared with himself. I see, moreover,

that he thinks, what is perhaps true enough, that I have been idle and somewhat extravagant at college, and that there is a great deal for me to learn before I shall be good for anything, especially such a charming little place as you would like him to get for me."

"Dear me, Claude! Surely he never told you all that."

"Oh, no! we were not intimate enough for that; but I saw it all plain enough—that is, I understood and interpreted little things he said. Oh, I daresay he meant it all well enough, and if one is looking for patronage, of course one must put up with unpalatable truths sometimes."

Mrs. Markham looked puzzled and amazed at this unexpected turn of Claude's mood, but Miss Alethea came briskly to the rescue, and observed,

"So much the better, Claude—much better than being flattered up and told whatever you do or have done is right. I like candour; there is nothing like plain speaking. I can



see your cousin Ramsay is a very discerning and conscientious man: no doubt he intends doing something handsome for you, and I think it much more likely now, after what you have said, than if he had made big promises and had given you to understand he thought you equal to everything, and as much a man of the world as himself—oh, depend upon it, he will get something for you when he has ascertained what you are most fitted for.”

Claude looked, as no doubt he felt, a good deal annoyed at his aunt's speech, but with some self-command he only said in reply,

“I only want to be put in the way of helping myself, and I have no doubt there are others who might be quite as likely to show me the way as well as Mr. Ramsay, and I shall be quite as ready to give, as to take, on the occasion.”

“Ah, very fine talking,” said the aunt, by no means understanding or appreciating the independent spirit and feeling of the young

man. "But when you talk of giving—I should like to know what you have to give?"

"Not much, as I daresay you would consider it, Aunt Alethea; but I would give my time, and such talents as I may possess, and devote them honestly and heartily to any calling that would bring me in return an independent and honourable maintenance."

"Very well said, Claude," said Mr. Crofton, who had entered a moment before unperceived by Claude, who was standing with his back to the door and too much engrossed with his subject to hear the entrance of our quiet visitor.

"I did not know you were there, sir," said Claude, turning his bright open face towards him; "but I daresay you know what we are talking about. I want 'employment,' and my mother and my aunt think 'patronage' is a more suitable word; but I do not care to ask anything as a favour."

"I fear you will find, Claude, that there are few things in the world worth obtaining to be

had without the trouble or humiliation of asking."

"That's just what I tell him," exclaimed Miss Alethea; "and as things must be asked for, why it is better to ask your own relations than strangers."

"There may be two opinions about that," returned Mr. Crofton quietly; and then added, "but is there a question about asking ~~for~~ any particular thing at this present time, and of any particular person?"

"Oh, no," said Claude hastily. "There is nothing tangible as far as I can see, it is all 'talkée' at present."

"But it *ought* not to be," put in Miss Ramsay, sententiously.

"Very well, Aunt Alethea; if you will procure me an appointment you will see I will accept it immediately, and enter upon its duties without further loss of time."

"Whatever may be its nature or your capabilities for the undertaking?" said Mr. Crofton drily.

Claude laughed, rather embarrassed, but answered in perfect good humour,

“Perhaps I am more willing than wise ; but do tell me, Mr. Crofton, is there any such great difficulty in getting some appointment that will pay well—say some Government employment. I would do my very best to become master of the situation and devote all my energies honestly to the calling, whatever it might be.”

Claude spoke rather hurriedly, looking a little anxiously at Mr. Crofton as he did so, seeming to have some vague notion that Mr. Crofton might help him as well, or even better, than his lately found cousin, and that it was far pleasanter on his own part, to make application to his old friend than his new acquaintance.

I felt charmed with the earnest grace with which Claude made his appeal, and the open, confiding expression of his handsome, honest countenance were, I thought, perfectly irre-

sistible. In my sisterly enthusiasm I almost expected to see a responding degree of animation in the manner of our very quiet, undemonstrative friend—and was therefore a little hurt and disappointed when, after a moment's pause, Mr. Crofton said in the most measured tones,

“Are you aware, Claude, that in seeking a Government appointment, you subject yourself to strict investigation as to your antecedents in various ways?”

“Well, sir,” answered Claude, a little less eagerly, “I hope there is nothing very disgraceful to be revealed in that respect. To be sure,” he added, with a little ingenious hesitation, “I am not quite so free from debt as I could wish, but it is the great desire I have to get free from these embarrassments, that makes me so anxious to get some situation, where, if I worked hard, I might hope to be well paid, in order to pay off others.”

“I fear,” returned Mr. Crofton, leisurely,

“if that is the case, it will not be so easy to obtain a Government appointment ; there is so much competition now-a-days, so many experienced candidates in the field, that embarrassed young men can entertain very slight hope of success in that department. Still—there may be other things more open and easy to be had—especially if you have interest.”

“I have none, sir, as you are probably aware,” interposed Claude, with some vehemence, whilst Mrs. Markham and Miss Ramsay respectively exclaimed—

“My brother!”—“My nephew!”

“Ah!” said Mr. Crofton, “from what I have seen of Mr. Ramsay, he would be more cautious even as regards a relative than a stranger.”

“No doubt, sir,” returned Claude ; “and I feel I am far more of the latter than the former to him.”

“Well,” said Mr. Crofton, as he tendered his hand in parting with a friendly smile to

Claude, "I will think over your matters, and if no good comes of it, I promise you that no harm shall."

## CHAPTER XIV.

AFTER a time Mr. Ramsay wrote himself, and sent the most authentic account of his father's state. There was a slight change for the better—it was hoped that consciousness was returning.

After this welcome dispatch had been duly conned over by the two sisters, and discussed in all its aspects by the whole family, Claude was deputed to carry the intelligence to Mr. Crofton and the ladies there.

“Come with me,” said Claude, as he left the room on his mission, and I went.

We found Mr. Crofton superintending some plantations he was thinning out near the house, and his sister and daughter were loitering



near him. Flora was amusing herself with a little dog—a Skye terrier—Mr. Ramsay had either given her or left in her charge. Mary Crofton was busy talking to some labourer about his sick wife or child, and hardly perceived us, as we stopped near Mr. Crofton, to communicate the intelligence we had brought with us.

Flora came running up to us, followed by her tiny playfellow, and seeing the letter in her father's hands, glanced from it to us with a look of inquiry, saying,

“No bad news, I hope?”

“No, much the same as we received a day or two ago,” returned her father, seeming to take it for granted their thoughts were travelling in the same direction; but Flora, as if ignoring the inference, observed—

“Oh! you mean from Mr. Ramsay? Have you heard from him?” to Claude.

“*I* have not been so honoured, but my mother—or my aunt—I really do not know which—received a letter this morning, and

thinking you might feel an interest in its contents, sent it over."

"Oh!" said Flora, drawing little lines on the ground with the end of a small stick she held in her hand, probably on Tip's account. "Oh! you are very good, I am sure, to take all that trouble, Mr. Claude. But I believe papa has had all the news from Mr. Ramsay himself already."

"I do not doubt it," said Claude, somewhat stiffly—adding—"Then there is no reason why we should interrupt you any longer. Come, Marian."

"Nonsense, Marian; I say, come back with me to the house. I am tired of standing about here, and now you have walked so far, you had better come in and have luncheon, and rest yourself."

"Thanks," said Claude, half laughing, "thanks for your hospitality, but I do not think I require either."

"Well," returned Flora, rather hastily, almost pettishly, "you need not come with us, if you

prefer not: but you need not answer for Marian. Here, Aunt Mary, persuade her to come back with us."

Nothing loth, I followed my friends, whilst Claude dropped back into the rear with Mr. Crofton, who, having finished his instructions, began to walk towards the house, taking it for granted we would accompany him. That being the case, Claude made no further protest, and we all walked to the Hall together, and soon after found ourselves assembled round the luncheon-table, when the conversation became general. We perceived then that Mr. Crofton (whom we had not seen for some days) was far more *au fait* at the state of affairs in Lord Ramsay's family than his own relations had been up to the present day, when they had received the few hasty lines of which Claude was then the bearer. Flora seemed to take everything very quietly, and the question of life or death to Lord Ramysay affected her but little; it certainly did not take away her appetite, or the power of enjoying herself in

various ways. Following my own train of thought, I said to Mary Crofton,

“It must be an anxious time for Mr. Ramsay.”

“Yes, I feel sure it is, especially so, for he appeared to me to be a very devoted son, far more so than is often the case where the two men lead such very different lives, and the younger one has every means of enjoyment so entirely within his own power. I was struck, in the days of our earliest acquaintance, with Mr. Ramsay’s manner of speaking of his father. It was the first thing that impressed me strongly in his favour. It was not that Mr. Ramsay made any parade of his filial regard, but it was very evident, from the little he did say on the subject, that he really looked up to, as well as loved his father.”

“Surely there is nothing uncommon in that, though of course it is amiable,” said I.

Mary Crofton smiled.

“I believe it is more uncommon than you suspect. Men as clever as Mr. Ramsay are

apt to consider themselves a little in advance of their fathers, be they ever so clever in their turn. The world with them is always advancing, at least, in their own persons, and fathers have more to learn than their past experience has taught them. Lord Ramsay is, by common report, a man of real ability and high endowments; his son has much of the same talent, but I see is well contented to take the lower place where his father is concerned. He seems, besides, to have the warmest affection for his father, as well as the highest appreciation of his character and talents. I am certain this is a most severe blow to him in every way."

"We will hope he may recover," said I in reply.

"From Mr. Ramsay's letters I do not think there is any ultimate chance. He seems to consider it only a matter of time."

Flora was feeding her dog, and had not spoken. However, she now looked up, and said quietly,

“I suppose he will be Lord Ramsay if his father dies?”

No one answered. There was something that jarred upon ones feelings in the remark, but Flora did not seem to consider she had said anything but what was natural and appropriate to the occasion, so she added, “Won’t he?”

Mary answered quickly,

“Of course, there is no other son, or child, but him. But we need not talk of that at present.”

“Oh, no, Aunt Mary, I only asked.”

I do not think Claude or Mr. Crofton were attending to what passed then; and after that the subject languished, and we talked no more of Mr. Ramsay, or his father either.

A few days after this visit Mr. Crofton met with an accident in attending to these self-same plantations, about which he was much interested, and often worked as hard as any of his labourers. It was owing to the slip of an axe with which he was lopping an old tree, to give

more room to one recently planted; it was an unsightly gash, and unfortunately, from having taken the axe in his left hand to ease the one generally used, the full force of the blow fell upon the right hand; the wound appeared so serious at first, that there was great consternation throughout the house, and every one in ours was little less alarmed and interested in the progress of its treatment and amendment.

It happened that Claude was with Mr. Crofton when the accident happened, and was fortunately so far enabled to be of use in binding up the hand, and supporting him till the medical man arrived, who pronounced the injury so extensive, that he had fears of lockjaw in consequence; happily, he said, Claude's presence of mind and consequent help had done all that could be done to avert the evil at the moment.

In a short time all our anxiety was happily relieved, and Mr. Crofton with his lame hand was pronounced to be going on as well as could be desired. I mention this, because it

was the means of bringing my brother Claude into far more intimate relations with our neighbour than had ever before been the case, or would have been, it is likely, had it not happened that they were thus accidentally brought together. Claude was in constant attendance upon Mr. Crofton whilst he was quite laid up, and ordered to see no one but himself, who, having been his main-stay throughout the accident, came soon to be looked upon by Mr. Crofton as almost essential to his wellbeing during the time he was ordered to lie by and nurse his hand and himself.

Claude on his part took the liveliest interest in Mr. Crofton's progress towards recovery. His prompt assistance in the first instance had done so much, that it was but natural he should watch and tend the case with more than ordinary solicitude.

Mr. Crofton recovered as far as regarded his usual health and strength, but his hand was maimed, to a certain extent, for life. It



had been too severely injured ever to regain its natural power and suppleness again. He could manage by dint of time and trouble to indite a letter that might be legible to his friends, but general correspondence was a work of pain and difficulty to him. Hence it came that it was necessary for him to employ a secretary, or general amanuensis. It was a great privation for a man who had an extensive correspondence, and also was an occasional contributor to some of the best literary periodicals of the day.

To be brief—after a little deliberation and some consideration he offered the post of private secretary to his young and helpful friend, my brother Claude. Mr. Crofton had seen much of him during the time of which I speak, and had become more intimate with him as regarded character and disposition in those few weeks than during the whole previous years of their acquaintance. When the offer was made to Claude, it was a most generous one, and worthy of him who made

it. He claimed the privilege of intimate acquaintance then, as well as a debt of gratitude still owing, to do all that he wished on the occasion. He begged as a friend to be allowed to see the schedule of Claude's college debts, which were still waiting for some turn of good fortune (which was never likely to come) to be discharged. Mr. Crofton then generously proposed to cancel all—they were not in fact so numerous or so large as we had all apprehended, but such as they were Mr. Crofton enabled Claude fully to discharge them all. He did not like to be thanked on the occasion. I ventured to say something of how deeply his mother and all his family felt the force of his kindness. He stopped me abruptly—

“ You will oblige me, Marian, by never saying another word on this subject. If I have obliged your brother, he has obliged me far more. I am glad to be of use to him—a man so much older than himself may claim the privilege; besides, he is about to become

my confidential friend and secretary. I shall require all his attention on my own behalf. How could I expect it whilst his thoughts must necessarily be distracted on the subject of ways and means as regarded his own private affairs? I have set his mind at rest, that I might claim the benefit of its special meditations for myself. You see, after all, I have been acting, like most people in this world, from the principle of self-interest. Now we will say no more on the subject—let it rest with Claude and myself.”

So no more *was* said about it, and Claude very shortly entered on the duties of his new situation. He was to receive two hundred a year, a sum which at that time appeared a little fortune to poor Claude. His mother grumbled a little, in spite of her real satisfaction and expressions of gratitude to Mr. Crofton, for what he had done for her son. She chose to declare it was a great sacrifice for her to give up all her only son's time and society to another. Still, it was

settled that Claude was to live at home. We were not to be deprived of his cheerful presence in the old home. We women—a party of four in all—felt the need and necessity of a man’s protection and presence amongst us. There was comfort in the sight of Claude’s old hats on the hall-table; besides many other tokens of his masculine nature about the house and premises.

It was settled that he was to present himself at Crofton Hall at ten o’clock every morning, save the Sabbath, and there he was to remain, doing such things as Mr. Crofton required, until six o’clock in the evening, when he came home to us, and took his accustomed seat at the bottom of his mother’s dinner-table. So she had small need to complain of his absence during the day on such advantageous terms; though Mrs. Markham would sometimes plaintively declare that Claude was far more of a son to Mr. Crofton than he could ever be now to herself.

This complaint drew forth an observation

from Miss Alethea, that perhaps instead of *seeming like* a son, Claude might become one in reality to our rich neighbour. At that, Mrs. Markham opened her eyes and mouth, to ask how that might be. Miss Alethea nodded her head mysteriously, and asked—

“Why, hasn’t he a daughter?”

“Oh! Flora, yes—but she is all but engaged, if you mean that; and, besides, I don’t think Claude ever much liked her; and of course she would prefer Ramsay.”

“Well, I daresay she would, if he were to make her an offer; only it does not seem he has done so yet. And he may think twice about it when he comes to be the head of his family; and they have not, as I know, heard very lately from him, though he wrote so often at first; and my opinion is, Lady Percival will try and talk Ramsay out of it, if she gets to know all about his love, or whatever it might have been, for that little girl. She would like him, I know, to marry quite differently. He does not want

money, so that would be no object. But, talking about Ramsay, I do wonder how my brother is going on!—it must be a fortnight at least since any one heard anything of or from him. What can they all be about?"

## CHAPTER XV.

TO the surprise of everyone, his medical attendants included, Lord Ramsay lingered on—hovering, it seemed, between life and death, for several weeks. At length the weeks passed into months, and still there was little or no change. During all this weary time, his son never quitted him or relaxed in his devoted attentions. We heard, however, but seldom then from Mr. Ramsay; and as time went on, it appeared he also slackened his correspondence at the Hall. No doubt he had little to communicate in either case; his time and thoughts seemed to be engrossed with his home anxieties.

Thus the winter passed slowly away; it had been a peculiarly long and severe one, and we had felt it much in our nothern and bleak country. Thus, afterwards, when the frost gave way, and the snows melted towards the latter end of March, we were prepared to welcome any indication of spring with double gladness. At one time the road between us and the Croftons had been so far blocked up as to become almost useless, and it was only a very hardy and venturous passenger that could make his way on foot between the two houses.

I speak of this as it was out of the question at one time for any woman to attempt the walk, had she been so inclined.

There were few days on which Claude did not make his appearance in the old home, but the time came when it was needful that he should remain the night at the Hall. Mr. Crofton was beguiling the tedious hours of the dark dreary days with some literary composition in which he found



great solace and amusement, and my brother's presence was more than ever needed to transcribe and arrange, as well as write from Mr. Crofton's dictation. So we had far less of his company that winter than in those that had preceded it.

I think Mr. Crofton found a certain pleasure in the young man's cheerful companionship, and he continually pressed his remaining at the Hall during the worst part of our winter weather. He did not affect any Christmas festivities at the Hall, even in the very moderate degree that might have been expected from a man of his retired ways and habits.

I believe much of his peculiarity at this season, was owing to certain associations and recollections of Christmas time as connected with his early married life; whatever it was, I know Mr. Crofton always led a more secluded life then than at other times of the year.

Neither Juliet nor I had ever been invited

to spend any part of Christmas at the Hall. We had, therefore, no cause for disappointment when this passed away like preceding ones. Still, as Claude happened to be domiciled at Crofton Hall just at the beginning of the New Year, we both felt that we should have liked to have been there also for a few days; we might have made a certain circuit, which, by taking the high road nearest to us, that was becoming well beat, and would have brought us to our friend's door after an interval of a few miles drive.

The parsonage, too, was hardly accessible from its usual point of transit from our house, though there was a narrow pathway to the church from the village, often filled up by repeated storms of snow and wind, but still used by such of the hardy villagers as were within reach of our church. In spite of all obstacles, Luke Dillon came and went much as usual; no weather deterred him from visiting either his friends or his parish-

ioners: and Juliet, emulous of such good example, was unremitting in her labours, both with her school and her choir.

There was, alas! no Christmas feast for them, or for our poor neighbours at the old Manor-house that year. The open hand and generous heart that had hitherto so lavishly supplied it was cold and closed for ever: and we, who remained to fill his place, were supposed to be prevented by our untoward circumstances from ministering to our poorer neighbours' greater necessities, according to our ancient custom.

Happily they were not left to feel the cold contrast of present and former hospitality at that season of rejoicing, for Luke, with a consideration and tact that surprised me and my dear old grandfather, with a liberality he could ill afford, insisted on relieving us of our presumed obligations in that respect. So the poor were feasted, and clothed, and warmed, and entertained, almost as abundantly as in my father's lifetime. It was quite a bur-

den off my mind. Nevertheless it was, altogether, a dreary Christmas time, Juliet being so engrossed with her self-imposed duties, and Claude so much absent, whilst the state of the roads prevented my getting beyond our own grounds; so I felt the want of companionship more than usual.

What Mrs. Markham did with herself, or how she found employment or amusement that solitary winter I could not tell. I could not remember seeing her with any occupation whatever, either as regarded herself or others; it seemed to me the most aimless, miserable existence in the world. She appeared satisfied to make over all her household cares, as well as her childrens' interests, to her sister's more energetic management. Miss Ramsay appeared well satisfied that it should be so, and made the most of the deputed power thus placed in her hands. She seemed to find great gratification in the exercise of the small petty economies which it was part of her system to establish throughout our *menâgé*. It might

be in some degree necessary, perhaps, but it was certainly anything but pleasant to hear her discussion on the same. I never could take much interest in the details of domestic management, especially when conducted on so small a scale as Miss Alethea seemed to consider right and proper, even to the abridgement of the comforts and indulgencies our old servants had been used to in my father's lifetime. It made my heart ache and my spirit rebel sometimes, when Miss Ramsay triumphantly enumerated the stringent rules she had established regarding the domestic consumption in the once liberal household.

Mrs. Markham listened complacently. She was to receive the benefit of the saving and pinching thus declared to be the law of our land, in all its sordid meanness. I was but too thankful that my dear absent brother's continued kindness gave me the opportunity of contributing my mite to the exigencies of our poverty-stricken household. I verily believe, but for that small consideration, I

should have been compelled to have sought a home either with my grandfather and Luke, or, failing that, in some situation either as a governess or companion. I had certainly no wish to go out amongst strangers, and clung to my old home, even with all its uncongenial accessories, with the fervent affection of my early childhood.

In the midst of these depressing influences that winter my chief stay and comfort was in Claude's well-being. My half-brother was very dear to me, and the charm of his character and disposition with all the little frailties of the former, exercised a fascination over my heart and mind that a more perfect development of both might have failed to establish. There was a something very charming even in Claude's little faults and follies, and now he was in great part removed from us, we seemed even to forget those, and to magnify the virtues he did possess. It was joy and gladness to see the dear boy so happy, so well satisfied with

his new lot in life, and he was full of hope and happiness as to the future.

He and Mr. Crofton seemed to get on to perfection; the real sweetness of Claude's temper suited the man of many moods. It was all so genuine; there was no servility about it, nor, on the other hand, either touchiness or sensitive pride.

Claude felt quite independant; he was giving all in his power to his friend and patron, and glad to secure from his abundance means for an honest livelihood. He told me it was his full purpose and intention in the course of time to repay Mr. Crofton all he had advanced for the liquidation of his college embarrassments; he looked upon it as a loan, not a gift. At the same time he acknowledged the immense boon it had been to him to have the pressure of these debts so summarilly lifted from his heart and conscience. Both, he said, had felt oppressed by the incubus; but it was his full intention to repay all, and that

Mr. Crofton knew of and approved his design.

Claude seemed to be leading a very happy life at the Hall. He said he had plenty of outdoor occupation and amusement, besides his duties as secretary, which were generally confined at that time to the evening hours.

There was certainly no drudgery in his manner of life there. It sometimes entered my mind to wonder whether, in the life he was then leading, he was thrown much into the society of the ladies of his patron's family. They must of necessity meet at the daily family meals, and it struck me as likely, that lively Flora would not be averse to secure such a companion as Claude in her several employments and amusements. I did not take any very deep or serious view of the probabilities I have alluded to at that time, but having plenty of leisure to think and speculate about my absent friends, my thoughts, as was their wont at most times, frequently travelled to Crofton Hall. I was neither hopeful nor apprehensive on the sub-



ject. I believed Flora's affections, such as they might be, were already engaged, or at all events on the road to be so. As for Claude, I believed him to be perfectly fancy free, and without the slightest partiality for the lovely Flora. I asked him one day, when he happened to be regretting the prolonged absence of Juliet and myself from the Hall, whether he saw much of the ladies there. Claude's answer came readily enough,

“Oh yes, we can't help ourselves, we are reduced to various devices to kill the time; when it snows so hard there is nothing to do out of doors—of course there is plenty for me to do,” he said laughing—“I have my duties as secretary to perform, but there is that little Flora asking me to do all sorts of things for her when there is nobody else, I suppose, for her to apply to.”

“And Mary? Does she try to make you useful also?”

“Not often: Miss Crofton likes to do most

things for herself, so she is not often troublesome in that way."

"Do you find Flora very troublesome, Claude?"

"I should be an ungrateful puppy if I said so or thought so," replied he rather warmly, adding, "I was only in joke; they are neither of them really troublesome, and I am very glad if I can be of any use to Flora or any of them. They are all kindness to me."

"You must like being at Crofton, Claude, better than here?" I asked with a slight twinge of jealous feeling.

"It is pleasant being there, and I wish you and Juliet were there also this Christmas, for this place has grown so dull and dreary I hardly know it for the same cheerful dear old home it used to be."

"Yes, it is changed sadly."

"Indeed it is, and every one in it—no, not you, Marian dear; though you are a trifle graver than you used to be. And then my mother; well, we won't say a word about

her, only I wish she would exert herself a little, and take the reins of government out of the honourable hands that have so entirely usurped them. It goes to my heart to hear some of the complaints the old servants make. They will all be leaving—if they are not sent away; and then no Christmas doings!—no gifts—no anything, either for rich or poor here! It is a sad change indeed!”

“But we are very poor, Claude!”

“Not too poor,” he answered quickly, “to give something to those that are poorer still. Look at your grandfather, the dear, noble old man! They say he is poor; well, it has not prevented his using hospitality without grudging this Christmas.”

How cordially I assented to this generous praise I need not record, nor how deeply I lamented my own inability to do more than offer fruitless wishes.

The Christmas-time passed slowly away. At the expiration of that term Mr. Crofton emerged from his seclusion. He came amongst

us as usual. He had a peculiar kind of horror of the greeting of "a merry Christmas and a happy new year." No one would have dreamt of accosting him in that stereotyped form, and he took care not to approach us till all danger was past—even from Miss Ramsay. And Mrs. Markham, having at that time given up all thoughts of merry-making on her own account, and having no very bright anticipations as regarded the future, she was in no danger of disgusting her fastidious friend with any weight or warmth of good wishes for his individual prosperity.

As I have said, Juliet was a good deal out during the day, though her range lay near and in a very narrow compass, so we always knew where to find her; but she had made for herself interests and occupations which seemed to vary her life and prevent her feeling the dreariness and monotony of that season of the year. She was no longer my pupil; she had taken her own peculiar

line of pursuits, in which she neither sought my co-operation or advice. For all that, I confessed they were good and laudable enough.

As my own feeble frame did not admit of so much exposure and exercise, I was necessarily more within doors, and was frequently seized upon by Miss Alethea to help in long tasks of household needlework, which from my heart I abhorred.

It was during the intense weariness of an interminable morning spent in such occupation that we were enlivened by the sight of Mr. Crofton, who had walked over through the frost and snow for the first time that winter. I had so long speculated on our chances of seeing him each morning, that when he did come I had ceased to expect him. Perhaps it was owing to the extreme dullness of the life we were then leading that I was more than I had ever been before conscious of the pleasure and brightness which attended his coming. With all that,

however, I had a certain awe of our friend which prevented any particular expression of gladness on the occasion, such as I might have indulged in had it been Mary Crofton instead of her brother who walked in that morning.

I was only aware how every thing seemed changed in that dreary apartment, and what a joyful and pleasant thing it seemed to hear the tones of his voice once more. The general good effect of Mr. Crofton's visit was visible also on the two elder ladies, as well as myself. Mrs. Markham awoke up into something like animation, and entered into an almost lively discussion of some public events of the day. Miss Alethea had her subjects also of engrossing interest, but, as usual, they lay more within the narrow compass of home and domestic politics. I had little individually to say, after an inquiry or two relating to his sister and daughter, but I had not the less pleasure in listening to all that passed; and so the pleasant hours

of Mr. Crofton's visit flew all unheeded. At last he rose to go: it was then in parting he turned a quick, scrutinizing glance on my face, and asked abruptly—

“Have not you been well?”

“Perfectly,” was all my reply, and all that was needed, for Miss Alethea, overhearing the query, hastened to answer for me. She did not speak unkindly, but she gave my friend to understand that I was idle—inclined to mope all day in the house—did not relish household employment when obliged to remain indoors, &c.,—to all which Mr. Crofton quietly replied—

“I do not wonder at it, if the work I see before her is her general employment,” glancing at a hard tablecloth, which, with pain and difficulty, I had just succeeded in hemming.

Then, as Miss Ramsay rambled on about the usefulness of plain work, and the need there was that I, above everyone, ought to learn to like it, he stopped all with an admission it might be profitable, if not pleasant, to be so engaged.

“But,” he added, turning to me, “would not you like a little change now? If you do not mind the cold so very much, come with me for a little walk.” And I went.



## CHAPTER XVI.

I HAD some few more pleasant walks that winter. I hardly realised how pleasant they were at the time, nor how greatly they tended to the health both of body and mind.

It was not till the spring began to dawn (which succeeded our severe winter that year late in March) that Juliet and I were asked to stay a few days at the Hall. I do not know why we had not been asked before. I had longed and listened to hear of such an invitation; but Mr. Crofton never seemed to think of the joy and relief such a change would have been to me. I was, however, very grateful for the walks he took me, and still more for the pleasant talk which enlivened them. He had

a most charming talent for conversation ; the worst part of it was that it beguiled the time so wonderfully, that an hour seemed but a few minutes.

But at length the spring came, and with it our invitation to Crofton Hall. I think Miss Ramsay would have been well pleased had she been included in it. Such an idea never seemed to enter Mr. Crofton's head. Juliet and I were asked as the guests of his sister and daughter ; he seemed to have no idea beyond that. It was pleasant indeed to find ourselves once more within those walls, and to enjoy my friend Mary's conversation, hardly less appreciated than her brother's. She and I had not met for a long time, notwithstanding the short distance which actually separated us. But Mary had suffered from cough all that winter, and as I had not been asked, I had not made any effort to see her. Mr. Crofton appeared to think we could both exist perfectly well without meeting every week, or, it might be, months.

Juliet and Flora seemed to have become less necessary to each other's happiness than had been the case before. Juliet was extremely engrossed and preoccupied with her present occupations; they were chiefly directed and controlled I believe, by my cousin, Luke Dillon; but there was also residing not far from us a busy little maiden lady, who was a great ally of hers. I have not before mentioned her (a Miss Jones), because, being only the daughter of a former medical man of no celebrity, she had never been recognised either by Mrs. Markham and her sister, or asked by them to the Manor-house. Still, she had been a friend of my mother's, and often visited at the parsonage, and was a great authority on all parish matters. She had been as kind to me as circumstances permitted when a child, and though Juliet had barely tolerated her in her more juvenile days, she seemed suddenly to have waked up to a sense of Miss Jones's merits, and she had become a great authority with my young sister in many ways. This last winter, after my re-

monstrance in the summer about frequenting the parsonage, she had elected to make Miss Jones's little house not far distant the place for meeting her singers, when it was impossible to get to the church, and the busy and excellent little woman was only too glad to be the means of furthering any proceedings with a charitable object as their basis.

Thus it was that no one objected to Juliet's frequent absences—indeed, the high and independent tone she assumed in such matters began to be felt in our little household; and so she pursued the even, or it might be uneven tenor of her way, for no one seemed to think it necessary to inquire very particularly as to her going out or coming in. I was very glad therefore when this most welcome invitation from Mr. Crofton brought Juliet and I more closely together than had been the case for some months previously—indeed, not since those pleasant days we had passed with our friends by the sea-side, when Mr. Ramsay was the pri-

mary cause of all our enjoyment. His name had rather faded out of our home associations—neither Mrs. Markham nor her sister appeared to feel much further interest in Lord Ramsay's state. I suppose they considered it one of hopeless invalidism, and so dismissed the subject to a more convenient season.

I was glad of the opportunity of asking Mary—for I had not liked to make the inquiry of Mr. Crofton—as to whether they had heard lately from Mr. Ramsay; and it was then I found, to my surprise, that their communication had not been much more frequent than our own. I could not help exclaiming at this, and asking what Flora thought.

“She thinks nothing about it, I hope and believe,” said Miss Crofton. “She was such a child that I think she hardly drew any inferences from Mr. Ramsay's very devoted attention for the time being; and since he has ceased to write, I really believe she has ceased to think about him.”

“And your brother? What does Mr. Crofton think of it?”

Mary looked hastily round, but no one but ourselves were in the room, and she answered,

“I cannot tell what he *thinks*. You know how reticent Keene is on such subjects; and he never speaks of Mr. Ramsay otherwise than as an acquaintance, who one has met on life’s high road, and who has passed on and made no particular mark in our history.”

“But surely he cannot have been blind to what we all saw respecting Mr. Ramsay’s devotion to, and admiration of Flora?”

“I can hardly tell—I fancied at one time that he saw and approved; but since our friend is gone, and makes no further sign, I do not think Keene will ever recur to any such hopes or expectations.”

“But if he thought Flora’s happiness was engaged in it?”

“In that case, even, what could my brother

do? And you know he is so sensitively alive to her peculiar position as regards her unhappy mother, that he would make every allowance for the supposition of Mr. Ramsay's having only become acquainted with his family history after his return to London, and on that account withdrawing himself, as he seems now to be doing. As I say, such an idea would entirely preclude my brother's seeking to renew his acquaintance with Mr. Ramsay."

I was silent, for I never thought of combatting any views Mr. Crofton might entertain on any particular subject; and in this case I supposed it might possibly be even as Mary said. So, after a pause, I only observed,

"Poor Flora, it seems very hard upon her!"

"Yes, it is hard," replied Mary, meditatively. "It is one of the many cases in which innocent children suffer for the sins of their guilty parents. Oh! Marian," she continued, her eyes filling with tears, "how awfully strange it

seems that there are mothers, once happy and blameless, who can so far forget what they bring upon their innocent darlings—the irreparable loss of a mother's love in early life, and the dreadful stigma of their sin afterwards. However," she said, more cheerfully, "it *may* not be as I have said in Flora's case. I am only saying what might be."

"And you do not think Mr. Ramsay's silence or absence makes Flora unhappy?"

"Unhappy!—oh! no, she is as merry as ever. I hear her laughing now in the garden beneath there, with Claude and Juliet, at some of Tip's performances. I feel sure she is fancy free at present."

We were very happy altogether that well remembered visit, and certainly Flora appeared merry enough to ease the hearts of any who cared for her. She took especial pleasure in teasing her friend Juliet about her new interests and pursuits, or duties in life, as Juliet called them.



"I wish there were no duties in life," exclaimed Flora. "Juliet is quite altered since she has taken to them so vehemently. Now do tell me, Mr. Markham, don't you think your sister was much nicer before this last Christmas, and when she wasn't much better than me, or any one else?"

Claude laughed gaily and declared he had no doubt Juliet would soon change back again, particularly with such a good example before her.

"I am quite willing to be laughed at," said Juliet somewhat sententiously, "provided I am allowed to act as I think right."

"You have learnt that speech," said Flora mischievously, "from Mr. Luke Dillon."

Juliet flushed a little, but was in no ways discomposed as she answered,

"If he teaches what is right, I shall be always glad to learn."

The two friends could not agree at all as to what they each began to consider the

most desirable objects in life; but by degrees they fell more into each others ways, Juliet descended a little from her stilts and spoke and acted more like her former self, whilst Flora was beguiled by her into visiting her pet school, and made herself happy in dressing up half-a-dozen pretty little children in charming costumes to send there, which Juliet considered a very satisfactory beginning in the right direction.

Our little party of six was generally divided into two threes—the elder ones, in which I was included, and the three younger friends. Sometimes I caught myself rather watching to see on what terms Claude might be with his patron's beautiful daughter, whilst it seemed to me that neither Mr. Crofton nor his sister even bestowed a passing thought in that direction. Flora certainly appeared to great advantage at that time; there was not a shade of distance in her manner towards my brother, as though she might have considered her father's young secretary as not on a

perfect equality, as regarded social position, with herself; nor did any one in that kind family treat Claude Markham otherwise than they might have done some near and dear relation. The lines truly had fallen to him in pleasant places. I was quite satisfied when I saw the position he occupied at Crofton Hall, and the best of it was, that whilst he fully recognized and enjoyed his good fortune, the grateful feeling it produced seemed to elevate his mind and character.

“I only hope I am not too happy here,” Claude said to me one day when we happened to find ourselves alone. “I feel somehow,” he continued, “as if such a careless reckless fellow as I have been all the days of my life, has no right to step in here and live in clover all the rest of my days, just doing only what is so pleasant to be done, and sometimes I fear not doing it half as well as somebody else might do—though I do indeed try to do my very best for that dear man Mr. Crofton.”

"As he seems satisfied, I think you may rest so, Claude dear."

"Satisfied is a very poor word. I am happier here than I have ever been in my life."

"What is it makes you so *very* happy, Claude?" I asked with a sudden thrill of apprehension darting through my heart, as I looked on my brother's glowing, handsome countenance, still more beautified by the expression I read there.

"*What!* Oh, everything here. I could not point to any one thing in particular; it is the happy whole, I suppose—it was only yesterday Mr. Crofton made me a present of the gun he has lent me this month back; he is always doing some kind, generous thing by me—and now you are come, and Juliet with her little queer, new, precise ways, it is pleasanter than ever."

And so in truth it seemed to be to us all. And yet, how little there seems to relate in reference to that time. I had never

seen Mr. Crofton so thoroughly genial, and with so little variety in his mood, as at that time. He often talked to me almost like an old friend of his own standing, and as one that could enter into all his feelings on most subjects of interest. He showed me, for the first time, some of his precious manuscripts, and even allowed me to read and make my comments without alarming me by the display of his superior wisdom and knowledge of things in general. In fact, I felt as if he placed himself more upon an equality with me than he had ever done before.

I do not know how it came about, but I fancy Claude was the connecting link between us—and the pleasant and improved position of things arose imperceptibly from the circumstance of his intimacy, almost adoption, of my brother into his family circle.

The last day of the last winter month came and went, and as it did so, verified

the truth of the old saying in the lamb-like nature of its departure. We were asked to remain at the Hall the first week in April, and on the first day of the month rose with the pleasurable expectation of an excursion that had been arranged for that day, if all was propitious for the undertaking. A mild, soft, spring-like April morning greeted my delighted eyes on first looking out. I threw up my window to enjoy the sweet breeze, which appeared to me laden with gentle promise of a happy day in prospect. We were to visit a distant farm of Mr. Crofton's in a beautiful spot about eight miles distant, near which were some remarkable ruins of an ancient priory. I had often heard of them, but had never seen the place. Some of us were to ride, and some drive—it had been a part of my happy lot, in the arrangement of the party the preceding evening, that Mr. Crofton had offered to drive me in his phæton.

I recall all this now with something of

the vivid feeling of anticipated pleasure so rarely coming in my way, and therefore the more deeply appreciated. I recall it all perfectly well now, though nearly twenty years have passed away since that bright morning. But who is there that has not certain days—sometimes hours even—not very eventful ones perhaps—but still destined to retain their place for ever amongst the unforgotten treasures of the by-past time? In this case, it was only the anticipations of that day that made so vivid an impression on my memory, as I have recorded them.

The day itself was fated to be one of disappointment, instead of enjoyment. The first check my happiness received occurred just as I had finished dressing, and was about to leave my room. I encountered Juliet, who came in to tell me she had caught a bad cold, had been awake all night, and felt far too ill to be able to join the party to the Heathfield Farm.

Seeing my look of consternation (which was not perhaps wholly and entirely on her own individual account, but for which Juliet gave me all sisterly credit), she hastened to assure me her illness was not of any serious nature—only a heavy cold, which would, no doubt, be right in a day or two, and need not prevent my going with the rest of the party as intended, and ended by saying that she should go down to breakfast and make her excuses, and then lie down again when we were all gone.

That suited me very well in my selfishness; and as I saw Juliet would really just as soon be alone, I did not propose staying at home to keep her company: and after a few words of sisterly inquiry and advice, we went downstairs together. Every one was in the breakfast-room except Claude, and almost before Juliet had told the story of her cold and intention of staying at home, he came in. He had a letter in his



hand, and went up directly to Miss Crofton saying,

“I hope I am not late; but I have been detained. I fear I am the harbinger of bad news. There is a note for you, Marian, from home. You and Juliet are to return there directly after breakfast. I met old Joseph in the stable-yard, and he gave it to me.”

I received the missive Claude handed to me in fear and silence, yet thinking what cause had *I* to fear. All I cared for most (I forgot my poor old grandfather at that moment) were around me in that room. So I took courage and opened my letter. It ran thus:—

“MY DEAR MARIAN,—My sister begs that you and Juliet will return home directly; we have had important news, of which I will tell you more when we meet. We have sent Joseph with the pony-carriage for you and your things; so come at once.

“Yours sincerely,

“ALETHEA RAMSAY.”

“What does it all mean,” said I, in consternation, looking round the table.

“I can tell you very plainly if you ask me,” said Flora, suppressing a little merry laugh, whilst her bright eyes sparkled with fun.

“What do you mean?” I asked, with a feeling of sudden relief.

“Only,” replied Flora, glancing at Claude, “that this is the 1st of April!”

Claude laughed in his turn, and said,

“I wish with all my heart that was all—but it is all plain matter-of-fact. No joke in it—no mistake even on my part. I saw old Joseph myself, and his orders were positive, to bring the young ladies home without loss of time, and Master Claude was to follow as soon as Mr. Crofton could spare him.”

“What a bore!” said Flora, all the merriment dying away out of her lovely face, and her delicate brows contracting as she asked—“What can it all be about—and just as we were going to have such a lovely day. Oh! papa—send over and say they can’t come.

We must go to Heathfall as we had settled."

But our fiat was soon sealed in another direction, for Mr. Crofton went out to see the old coachman himself, and brought back word as to the imperative nature of his message—though he knew no more himself about it.

There was, therefore, nothing more to be done but to pack up directly; and abandoning all my pleasurable expectations, I made my hasty adieux to my kind friends, and Juliet and I were soon driving away from the scene of our late enjoyment, and on our way to our dreary home.

Juliet, however, did not enter into my feelings of regret. She seemed rather glad to go, as if she experienced a sort of sick longing to be at home; for, as she came in sight of the old grey house, she looked at me with her heavy eyes, and said,

"Well, after all it is a great comfort to be at home—especially when one feels so unwell;

it is so wretched to be ill when one is out. I am so glad we have got home!"

In a few minutes after we had entered the house, and Miss Ramsay came bustling out to meet us, and tell us "the news."

## CHAPTER XVII.

WITH some little agitation Miss Ramsay told us why we had been sent for. Her brother was really dying, and Mr. Ramsay wrote to say, full and perfect consciousness had returned as life ebbed slowly away, and that Lord Ramsay had expressed a great desire to see both his sisters before his death, if it were possible for them to come. Mr. Ramsay had sent a special messenger to urge this request of his dying father, and had further offered every facility for their coming, if so inclined.

I found, however, to my surprise, that Mrs. Markham was strongly opposed to the measure. She had a great disinclination to undertake the proposed journey.

“So trying as it would be to me in every way,” she kept protesting. Then added—“I have not seen Ramsay for such a long time, and just to go and see him die; what could be the use of it? If he were likely to live, and wanted me to go and stay with him, it would be quite another thing. He has taken very little notice of me and my children—has done nothing for Claude. No more has his son, for the matter of that. A death in a house is such a trying thing; I have really no nerves to encounter it—it would fairly upset the little strength I have left—and heaven knows that is little enough. So there is no use talking, Alethea; you can go if you like, and can take Juliet with you, I can keep Marian with me to look after things in your place.”

“Of course you can,” returned Miss Ramsay in a musing tone; “and that is what I have settled—so now, Juliet, lose no time, but get yourself ready to go with me this evening.”

But then a new difficulty arose—Juliet declared she was too ill to do anything but go to

bed that moment ; she was quite unfit to travel, and it was but too evident that she spoke nothing but the truth. Miss Ramsay could not reckon on her as a companion.

She was, however, quite decided to go and see her brother, according to his dying request. She had seen more of him throughout her life than Mrs. Markham had done, and as she was perfectly capable, both in body and mind, of undertaking the journey, she made no hesitation as to her intention of so doing. Having, however, set her mind upon having a companion, and there being no servant in our small household who was fitted for the position as lady's maid, her own being at that time invalided, she turned her thoughts towards myself.

Mrs. Markham was rather querulous about being deprived of my services, but after a short debate on the subject it was settled that I should fill the vacant place.

It may seem rather strange, in these days of juvenile independence and self-assertion,

that I should have been so passive on the occasion. I was perhaps by nature too yielding, especially to those in authority over me; and from my youth up I had been accustomed to obey Mrs. Markham, and I had lived so quiet and retired a life, that I inclined to the belief that most people in the world knew more than myself. So when I found it was arranged that I should have the honour of accompanying Miss Ramsay on her sorrowful expedition, it never entered my head to set up an apposition, or make a protest on my own account. On the whole, there was something rather exciting to my imagination in the sudden proceeding—I even liked the idea of going with Miss Ramsay. Indeed, a journey was so great a novelty, that I may be excused the feeling of satisfaction with which I began immediately to prepare for our departure that evening. We drove to the nearest town from which the train started—which was only a branch rail-



road, and communicated with the Great Northern line.

It was my first long journey in any direction, and London was at that time only known to me by name. I need not record, however, either my impressions on the occasion or the trifling incidents of that said journey. It was mid-day before we found ourselves driving up from King's Cross station to Lord Ramsay's house in Grosvenor Square.

Both Miss Ramsay and I were considerably fagged after our night's journey; at least I can answer for myself, for the strangeness of the whole thing made me feel too excited to get much sleep, and what I did get was far from refreshing.

We reached our destination, however, in perfect safety: and it seemed we were expected, as the servants opened the door the instant the railway cab stopped before it, and Mr. Ramsay came into the hall to meet us from a room which opened into it. I drew

back after the first greeting, in which Mr. Ramsay shook hands with me, but seemed hardly to recognize whether I were Marian or Juliet Markham—as he addressd me by each name alternately. Then he and his aunt conferred together in low tones respecting the state of the invalid. I heard Mr. Ramsay say at last.

“But perhaps you had better come up stairs, my Aunt Emma is in the morning-room, and she will tell you much better than I can, for she was up nearly all last night—for it had been my turn the one before.”

I gathered from that, and a few sentences previous to it, that the end was not yet come—that the dying master of the house still lingered on, hovering on the boundary line between the two worlds. It was a solemn thought, and stilled all the nervous perturbation I might otherwise have felt in anticipating an introduction to the “Aunt Emma” of whom Mr. Ramsay spoke, and whom I knew was the Lady Percival so little liked either

by Mrs. Markham or Alethea Ramsay. As for the latter, on the present occasion she appeared rather subdued, and neither spoke nor moved in her usual brusque bustling manner. I could perceive, however, a little start and glance of annoyance when her nephew spoke of the other aunt as also established in the house.

“Oh, is Lady Percival staying in the house?” she asked.

“Yes—we wanted her, and so she kindly came,” was all the reply; then a moment afterwards—“Whilst you are speaking to her, they shall bring some luncheon into the dining-room; I am sure you must both want it, after your hasty journey, and you had better rest, before you see my father—you will be better prepared for the sad alteration you must expect.” The last words were spoken very low and with great feeling.

Then we all ascended the broad stone steps of the wide staircase, treading as lightly as possible, as if the echo of our footsteps would

disturb the ear so nearly dead to all earthly sounds. On we went till Mr. Ramsay opened the door of a room quite at the back of the house, and divided by another staircase from the large drawing-rooms which looked to the front. Mr. Ramsay went into the room before us, and just saying, "Aunt Emma, they are come," turned round and left us to make our own way with the lady in possession of the apartment. It was a very charming room; I suppose it had formerly been the boudoir prepared for, and so briefly occupied by, the young bride of the man who, now advanced in years, lay upstairs awaiting the great change that was to reunite them.

It was evident every thing there was the same as it might have been all those long years ago, when it was so tastefully fitted up for her reception. The furniture was faded and the ornaments tarnished, whilst none of more modern invention had been added; there was an old-world look about the room; and yet, as I have said, quite enough remained of its

original splendour and adornment to make it seem a very sumptuous apartment to me. One side opened into a charming conservatory, and that was at that time resplendant with camellias, azalias, gardenias, and other sweet and beautiful flowers in the fullest perfection. Those, it appeared, were tended with the greatest care, and constantly renewed as the various changes of the seasons demanded. All this I saw at a glance; but my attention was chiefly riveted on the lady who was the sole occupant of the apartment. She was sitting on a low chair by the side of the fire with writing materials all around her and on her lap, some open letters were strewed upon the floor beside her; she appeared to be writing rapidly as we entered. She removed the desk or book which supported her letter from her knees as we came towards her, and stood up to receive Miss Ramsay, who advanced with what cordiality she could command to greet her.

I was prepared to see in Lady Percival a

woman advanced in years, and by no means pleasant in appearance or manners. I was therefore most agreeably surprised when I saw a small, fair, slight woman come towards us. Lady Percival was so fair and slight, with such lovely features, and still fair though pale complexion, that she looked much younger than her years. Her hair was light and remarkably abundant, though tinged with silver threads which, with her little lace cap and pearl grey ribbons, added a softening charm to her whole appearance. Her figure was slender as it had been when a girl, and her rich black dress gave it the fulness it might otherwise have wanted. Her foot was the smallest and her hand the most delicate I had ever seen. She was certainly the most lovely-looking elderly lady I could possibly have pictured to my imagination.

There was, beside, the irresistible spell of a perfect manner, a low sweet voice, and that indescribable charm of genuine high-breeding about Lady Percival that completed the full

measure of her fascination to my admiring astonishment.

The meeting between the two ladies was perfectly friendly, though it might have been a little constrained; but how could it have been otherwise with two such different natures? Miss Ramsay became more herself again, her subdued tones had disappeared, and her own more decided and sonorous ones had taken their place. She seemed to think it incumbent on her to "hold her own," as it were, in the presence of Lady Percival, for was not she, Miss Ramsay, the Honourable Alethea in her own brother's house? and quite as much or more entitled to an entrance and an abode there than Lady Percival!

So Miss Ramsay expanded and drew herself up to her full height, which certainly did make Lady Percival look very small, as far as inches were concerned; and then she bent on her those dark beetling brows, and smiled a stony smile as she held out her hand, which appeared to swallow up the delicate palm which was

placed with such gentle reserve within its capacious bounds. A few words were then exchanged regarding the state of the invalid. I heard, "A very restless night—just now fallen asleep—perfectly sensible—much pain—no hope," etc. etc., and then, having satisfied Miss Ramsay's most urgent inquiries with well-bred consideration, Lady Percival's gentle though quick-seeing eyes travelled beyond the ample figure in front of her, and rested on my insignificant form with a look of kind inquiry, saying as she extended her released hand—

"Your niece, Miss Markham, I presume?"

Then Miss Ramsay bustled round, having apparently quite forgotten my existence, and began to explain or rather account for my presence, saying—

"I ought to apologise, Lady Percival, for bringing and introducing to you Mrs. Markham's *step*-daughter instead of her *own* daughter Juliet, who ought to have come with me. My sister did not feel equal to the exertion



of such a journey and all she might encounter at the end of it; so I should have brought Juliet, of course, as her mother's representative; only the poor girl had a wretched cold. She could not possibly come, so I brought *Marian* Markham with me instead."

"How very good and kind of you to come!" said Lady Percival, endeavouring to make up with her kind cordiality for all that was disagreeable in Miss Ramsay's speech, and seemingly feeling doubly kind because I could have no possible claim on her consideration.

Miss Ramsay was evidently rather surprised that I should thus be welcomed, instead of tolerated, in that grand mansion, and by the fastidious Lady Percival, with whom she had never been able to establish a footing of intimacy since she had known her as Lady Emma Langley, the only sister of her brother's beautiful bride. Miss Ramsay, however, stood her ground, and muttered something about the treat of a journey to London to me.

Lady Percival cut her rather short by observing with a little almost imperceptible shiver—

“We can hardly think of a pleasurable visit just now.” Then turning to me as I stood a little apart, she said, “So I must think it very kind of you to choose to come amongst us at this sorrowful time.”

As some reply seemed necessary on my part, I murmured I had not had much choice in the matter, but I was very glad to have come, if I were not in the way.

“No fear of that, my dear,” said Lady Percival encouragingly, as she might have spoken to a bashful child. I never got the credit of my three and twenty years of life—at least rarely with straggers.

The days passed on with great sameness, and, as I saw nothing of the sick chamber, I found it difficult to realize the nearness of death with its stealthy approaching step in the house. All was bright and cheerful without, spring far more advanced in the great

square in which the house was situated, than in the bleak northern county I had so recently quitted. My walks were generally confined to its precincts, and sometimes the carriage was ordered to take me a drive; but it was generally in some retired locality, and neither of the ladies of the house accompanied me.

Every day, almost every hour, was expected to be the last to Lord Ramsay. His little lamp of life, however, continued to flicker in the socket, sometimes even reviving when almost extinguished. He saw and recognised his sister who had come to see him, and inquired after the one who was absent. But for the most part, I was told, he lay in a half comatose state, the only real satisfaction he seemed to have was in the presence of his son—that son who had watched him with so strange and touching a devotion and an enduring love almost passing the love of woman.

“He has a very tender heart beneath his

somewhat masculine undemonstrativeness of manner," said Lady Percival to me one day, soon after our arrival, adding, "and happy and fortunate will that woman be whom he chooses for his wife."

I found that Lady Percival was an enthusiastic admirer of her nephew, and I suspected would hardly think any girl worthy of such an enviable position. She was very kind to me, and I liked her accordingly. My first impression on seeing her had been—"Can this gentle lady be the formidable Lady Percival of whom I have heard both Mrs. Markham and Miss Ramsay speak as such a fastidious fine lady!—so capricious, so uncertain, and in the habit of saying and doing such disagreeable things!"

I found myself remarking with some curiosity the tone of conversation between the two ladies when together; and by degrees a sort of light began to break in upon my mind, and explained many things I could not reconcile. I soon discovered that with

all her gentle, quiet manner, Lady Percival was very quick-sighted, clever, and possessed of great discernment of character; she, moreover, was naturally lively, with a keen sense of the ridiculous, and a talent for drawing it out and making it expose itself. She had a highly cultivated mind, and could detect all attempts of superficial would-be clever people, and, if she were so inclined, could, in her quiet way, show them up, and expose their shallowness in a most discomfiting manner.

No doubt all this was more apparent in the earlier years of her life, for when I first saw Lady Percival she had passed through sorrow and trial enough to have tamed her bright spirits and blunted the keen edge of her wit. All whom she most dearly loved had been in turn taken from her—husband, sister, child. She was a lonely woman then in her own home: but she had made a fresh interest in life in the love she bore her sister's child. She had devoted herself

with no common affection to her nephew Mr. Ramsay; and I believe he fully appreciated her many charming qualities, and returned her regard with interest.

There were other relations besides Lady Percival occasionally to be seen in Lord Ramsay's house at that time. The most constant of these visitors were his younger brother—junior by many years—and his wife. Their society did not add much to the comfort of that sorrowful house, for they were both very ordinary and tiresome, if not disagreeable people.

Mr. Charles Ramsay was the brother with whom Miss Alethea had lived after her father's death, and had been deposed from her reign there on his marriage. It now suited Miss Ramsay to extend her friendship to her sister-in-law, and she frequently relieved the dullness of her days in Grosvenor Square by visiting her brother and his wife, and in pressing them to return the kindness.

I do not think Lady Percival found as much satisfaction from these frequent in-

vasions of the Charles Ramsay's, but she seldom showed any sense of annoyance, except by silence, or perhaps (to my regret) absenting herself in great measure from the common sitting-room. I am sure she felt it was not a fitting season for the display of any individual prejudices or differences of feeling, and therefore quietly avoided every thing that might provoke the same.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

LADY PERCIVAL had a house of her own in London. It was in Curzon Street, and was, in fact, her home. She seldom visited her country residence, which was a pretty place in Hertfordshire, but since the death of her daughter had been almost deserted. She had lived at Oaklands a great deal during her child's lifetime. It was her own, and her jointure-house, and she still kept it up. The larger and more stately mansion, where Emma Percival had passed the earlier years of her married life in Wiltshire, had passed with the title to Lord Percival's next brother. I heard she occasionally visited there, for



she was much attached to all her late husband's family. Still, it must have been a severe trial to her when she first went to her old home as a guest.

To her house in Curzon Street Lady Percival occasionally went for a few hours on such days as she supposed her absence would not be observed. She did not go often—relief as it would have been to her to do so—for Lord Ramsay would frequently wake up from his stupor and ask for his sister-in-law, who, next to his son, seemed most essential to his comfort. If she were absent, or did not immediately answer the summons, the poor man would become restless and excited till she did appear. Thus it happened that, at her nephew's request, she took up her abode for the timebeing in Grosvenor Square, and was ever ready to obey the sick man's call. One morning, after sitting for an hour or two in Lord Ramsay's room, and seen him sink off again into his death-like torpor, she came into the room where the

other members of the family were assembled, to mention her intention of going home for a short time, begging Miss Ramsay to send at once for her, should it happen she might be wanted.

I looked rather wistfully at her, and envied her the power of absenting herself, and changing the scene whenever she might please to do so. We were sitting in one of the front drawing-rooms, Miss Ramsay greatly preferring them to the cosy room where Lady Percival was always to be found. The Charles Ramsays were passing the morning, having come in to luncheon, as they were frequently in the habit of doing when making their daily visit of inquiry after the sick man. Mrs. Charles Ramsay was talking eagerly to Miss Ramsay, who apparently listened with great interest to the wearisome details, whilst her husband joined in with sundry remarks as occasion and the subject demanded. I can perfectly well recall Mr. Charles Ramsay's attitude and appearance, as day by day he

took up his usual post of observation on the drawing-room sofa. It was a large roomy old-fashioned couch, and suited him well for a lounge. He generally placed himself exactly in the centre, with his legs crossed, and his two hands grasping a cane he always brought with him, and amused himself by sucking the head of it, whilst his large, listless, prominent eyes were fixed without moving in a sort of stare on a group of marble statuary, placed just opposite, at the further side of the room. Sometimes he would remove his cane for a moment to put in some amendment or observation on his wife's discourse, proving himself as trivial in mind as either of the ladies who were chattering within earshot.

I was sitting near them all that morning, feeling very sad and lonely, and glancing out of the window at the budding trees in the square beyond, fully intending to steal away as soon as possible and enjoy a stroll there: but the dread of hearing any of the party

say—as happened occasionally—“Oh! going out, are you? Well, I may as well take a little airing also. I will come with you.” Besides, it was nearly luncheon time, so I knew there was no escape.

As I have said, Lady Percival came in, and her quick eyes travelled round the group and took it all in; after a moment she said,

“I am going home for an hour or two, Miss Ramsay; you can send for me if I am wanted. Ah, my dear Miss Markham, you look as if a little drive would do you good, perhaps you will kindly give me the pleasure of your company to Curzon Street? I shall like to introduce you to my Lares and Penates there.”

“I sprang up so gladly, that it provoked Miss Ramsay’s spirit of contradiction to say,

“Surely, Marian, you won’t go just now, when my brother and sister have come to luncheon. Besides, you can’t go out till you have had something to eat. Surely another day will do as well?”

“Oh, we shall find something to eat no doubt at my house: so, if you are not afraid of being starved, I hope you will come, Miss Markham.”

By that time I was at the door, exclaiming, I wanted no luncheon; and disregarding all Miss Ramsay's protestations, and even a slight stare of surprise from the prominent eyes and movement of the cane, as if the owner were preparing to speak, I effected my escape, and was soon safely seated by Lady Percival in the carriage.

“I am very glad,” said she as we drove from the door, “that you have not been deterred by fears of famine from coming with me, and I hope you are not as hungry as Miss Ramsay supposed, for I have told them to take us round a little way by way of a drive now we are out, and then we shall find luncheon ready when we get to Curzon Street, for I have sent word to say I am coming.”

That was a very pleasant drive. I had begun to like Lady Percival very much, and

in spite of the wide disparity of our ages, and various other discrepancies, I found her a very charming companion; there was so much freshness and originality in her heart and mind, and power of entering into the feelings and idiosyncrasies of those about her. So when she kindly inclined to make me her companion, it is no wonder I was greatly attracted by her talents and the charms of her conversation, not forgetting at the same time, how much I was indebted to Mr. Crofton for the power of enjoying and appreciating them both. It was entirely owing to him that I had any knowledge of many subjects of general interest on which she touched so delightfully. As we stopped at her door, she turned to me and said,

“Thank you for a very pleasant drive, my dear. I like the society of young people, especially of girls who are not entirely engrossed with the thoughts of their dresses and their lovers.”

I laughed as I answered.

“I am not likely to offend in that way, as I have very few of the one, and none of the other.”

“Meaning the lovers, I presume—well, so much the better, till the right time and the right man appears.”

After luncheon we went upstairs into the pretty reception-rooms, and from thence into a charming little room she called her snugery, and there Lady Percival told me I might amuse myself amongst her books and other things, whilst she held an audience with her housekeeper and settled her affairs.

It was a very pleasant permission to look about me and examine at my leisure the various objects of interest with which that room abounded. What first attracted my attention were the portraits on the walls. It appeared the lonely lady lived there surrounded by the mute resemblances of her loved and lost ones. I recognized first her sister's picture, Lady Blanche Ramsay, there being one in Grosvenor Square. The two sisters

must have been very much alike. Then there were two likenesses of her daughter—the other *Blanche*; she was not so beautiful as her mother must have been, but it was a fine intellectual face with a certain degree of family likeness to her mother and aunt. What promise there was in those deep violet eyes, and what sweetness of expression about that childlike mouth and chin!

There were two portraits also of her husband, Lord Percival—one taken when quite a boy, and the other, as I was told, just after his marriage. It was a very handsome face, with a frank kindly expression of countenance. Alas! for the poor widow so early bereaved. There were some beautiful miniatures also in various frames and settings—some being of her husband and child, but many also of faces unknown; but all full of a strange strong interest to me both from the beauty of the paintings, and also from the suggestive ideas they gave rise to.



There were many other beautiful and curious things and antique treasures collected there, but my attention was suddenly arrested by a new periodical on the table, and in which I knew Mr. Crofton's latest essay would be found. I soon discovered it, and recognised with delight the article which I had before been permitted to see in its manuscript undress. How eagerly I began to look it over, that is as well as the uncut pages—which I did not venture to divide—would permit. How admirably I followed my friend's ideas in print! how strong and conclusive all his arguments appeared thus attired, and how ably and clearly was every sentiment conveyed to the attentive reader through that medium; I fancied even more so than when I had formerly been permitted to scan the manuscript in the hand-writing of my brother Claude. On I read with avidity, delighting again to come in contact with the thoughts of that master mind. Some-

times I was obliged to skip at places where the united pages opposed my progress and enjoyment, yet sufficiently conversant with the original to be able to follow the sense of the whole. Such was my concentration of ideas that I neither heard nor saw Lady Percival when she returned to seek me.

The first intimation I had of her presence was the light pressure of a small hand on my shoulder, and then looking over it to see what it was that engrossed me so entirely, she said,

“Ah! I see what interests you so much; it is one of the papers I admire greatly, but I am sorry to say I do not know the author. Many of the writers in that periodical are well known to me either by name or personally—but who the initials K. C. belong to, I am ignorant of.”

“Oh, don’t you know,” returned I breathlessly, “that it is Mr. Crofton—Keene Crof-

ton! he is our nearest neighbour and best friend."

"Oh! that Mr. Crofton is it? Ah, I have heard of him, he is a very clever man. So you know him well?"

"Better than any one else in the world," I answered impulsively.

Lady Percival smiled, then said briefly—

"And those are the Croftons that Mr. Ramsay became so intimate with in his late visit to your family?"

"Oh, yes: I believe he made a great friendship with them."

"With the young lady, Mr. Crofton's daughter I believe, especially."

"Yes, Mr. Ramsay seemed to admire Flora extremely."

"You are so great a friend of theirs that perhaps it is hardly fair to ask you, Miss Markham, if—if—in short—you may suppose I have a deep interest, and no idle curiosity on the subject—but did Miss Crofton—

the Flora you speak of—did she seem to care for my nephew.”

I was much perplexed at this question, and put by one whom I wished on every account to treat with truth and sincerity; and yet what could I say. I feared, too, lest a word from me being repeated to Mr. Ramsay might influence either for good or evil; and if I had known more than I really did, would it have been fair to the Croftons to have repeated it? So I said as conscientiously as I was able,

“Flora Crofton is very young, almost a child, Lady Percival; and unless Mr. Ramsay himself had spoken to her on the subject, I doubt whether she would have thought about it. I am very sure no one else would; in fact, I really know nothing about it, and can say nothing except it seemed that Mr. Ramsay admired Flora—but she is so beautiful that I think any man must do so.”

“I *know* Ramsay admired Miss Crofton, for

he told me so himself," said Lady Percival quietly. "But you must not be offended with me if I tell you I consider there are grave objections to such a match; so I hope the young lady is, as you suppose, too childlike to have thought of Ramsay as a lover and possible husband."

"I do not think she has ever given a thought to that," said I, assuming more than I had any business to do on the occasion.

"Of course you are not ignorant of the family history, and that Miss Crofton's mother was divorced?"

"Poor Flora!" was all my reply.

"My dear child!" exclaimed Lady Percival in her kindest tone. "I am sure you think me a dreadfully prejudiced old woman; but I *am* particular on such points, for I have been born and brought up in a family where 'all the sons were brave, and all the daughter's virtuous.' So I confess that for my sister's son, who is now my one great object in life,

I do hope and expect better things than such an alliance."

"Does Mr. Ramsay think so himself?" I asked.

"Yes, his feelings are naturally strong on that point, and he was much shocked when he heard the family history. Still, I do not say that he would sacrifice either his own happiness, or that of another to them. I will speak to you openly, Miss Markham, for I feel sure I may, and that you can understand my motives and conduct. It was not till some time after Ramsay's return from the North that he spoke to me of the Croftons, or of his admiration of the daughter. He had forgotten, if he had ever heard the tale of scandal attached to the name—in fact, I believe he was at the time abroad—and a very young man in those days. I remembered it very well; for some of Mr. Crofton's family were well known to me, and the whole affair made some talk in our world of fashion. It was, moreover, an aggravated case of misconduct on the wife's part, for

which no excuse could be offered. I confess I should dread to have anything to do with the daughter of such a mother."

"But might not poor Flora be allowed to resemble her father as well; and he, you, and everyone allows to have been without fault?" I asked.

"It *may* be so. She *may* be all you say—well-principled, virtuous, good. There have been many such instances; but at the same time, there is the fearful chance the *other* way. There must be a *risk*, a *chance* in making such a connection, that the girl *may* resemble her mother more than her father."

"Flora is like both, I am told, in person," I observed, and then asked—"And what does Mr. Ramsay think?"

"Everything that is kind and good, as you may suppose; and he has been so much taken up and occupied with his poor father's state, that he has really had but little thought to bestow upon himself or his own individual affairs. All I begged of him, when I saw the state of

the case, was to leave things as they are for a short time. Not hastily to commit himself; but just to wait, and, if possible, ascertain the real nature of his own feelings, as well as those of the young lady and her family. Under present circumstances, it is of course easy to do as I advised him as to the first point—wait—and from what you tell me, it does not appear that anything is *expected* of him by Miss Crofton's family."

"*Expected!*—oh, no. Oh! Lady Percival, if you could but know what people Mr. Crofton and his sister Mary are, and how Flora has been brought up, I am sure you would not for one moment have the least misgiving in regard to her. I only hope and trust they may never know why Mr. Ramsay is changed; because Mr. Crofton has lived in retirement ever since that great blow fell upon him—his sense of it has been so distressing and accute. His sister, too, gave up her own marriage to live with him, and to help in bringing up Flora."



“Ah!” said Lady Percival, shuddering, “see what one woman’s crime brings on an innocent family. Will such things never speak strongly enough to deter from evil?”

“They *may* have done so, dear Lady Percival; for, as the old song says, we ought gently to scan our sister woman; for although everyone knows the evil that is *committed*, they know nothing about that which is *resisted*. It may be, too, that in many cases the mother’s unhappy case acts as a warning instead of example.”

“It may be so, my dear, and I daresay Ramsay will do all that is right and kind on the present occasion. Come, now, we must go, for the carriage is ready, and it is getting late.”

## CHAPTER XIX.

ON our return home we were met on the staircase by Mr. Ramsay; he drew his aunt's hand within his arm, saying—

“Come with me, will you? I think there is a change, and he has been asking for you since you have been gone.”

“Oh! why did you not send at once for me?”

“I did not like to hurry you, and I knew you would be back before long.”

When I went into the drawing-room after taking off my things, I found the sole occupants were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Ramsay. They seemed to have remained there all day,

which was rather an unusual occurrence, as they generally went their way after luncheon. On the present occasion Mrs. Ramsay was reclining in an arm-chair, with a smelling-bottle in one hand, and a pocket-handkerchief in the other. Mr. Charles Ramsay had started into sudden activity, and was pacing up and down the room with the head of his cane, as usual, in his mouth. He was a very heavy, dull-looking man, not positively plain as to features and figure, but most unprepossessing in my eyes. He was many years younger than the rest of the family, to which he had been a sort of post-script, but by no means a lively one. He had been kept in order by his sister Alethea whilst she made her home with him, and after that his wife continued the same course of treatment, only rather more stringently. Under her government he had been compelled to give his club up (where he had been in the habit of spending the chief part of his time), and, what was worse, the

consolation of smoking was also denied him, as Mrs. Ramsay could not endure the practice; hence, no doubt, arose the inveterate habit he had contracted of sucking the head of his cane—he had endeavoured to find a substitute for his cigar. He was not an ill-natured man, nor, I believe, had he any evil propensities; but he was intensely dull, foolish, and tiresome. I believe his wife admired him, and he was very grateful for all the attention she bestowed upon him.

She was not an agreeable person herself in any way; there was something extremely little in everything about her, as regarded all her thoughts and actions, though in person she was both large and tall; but her ideas all seemed to range within the narrowest intellectual compass; nor would she tolerate anything that did not entirely accord with those limitations. The consequence was that she was always “wondering.” She seemed to live in a state of chronic surprise; everything that did not accord with her own

rules and ideas was "the most extraordinary thing in the world"—in fact she existed in a world of wonders. With all this she had a most exalted notion of her own infallibility, and had contrived, somehow, to impress her husband with the same.

On entering the room I found both the lady and the gentleman were in a state of astonishment, and found it was caused by Lady Percival's having returned later than they had expected her back; moreover, they were surprised that Mr. Ramsay had not seen fit to send for her. And then they both stared at me, to see whether I was sufficiently impressed with the "extraordinary" nature of the whole proceeding.

"I suppose, from what I heard Mr. Ramsay say on our return, that Lord Ramsay is worse?" I assumed rather than asked.

"Oh! *much* worse!" said Mrs. Charles, with a prolonged inhalation of the smelling-bottle. "Soon after you were gone he had a sort of fit—not paralytic, or anything of that

sort; they called it convulsive. I only wonder Lady Percival went out to-day."

"But she could not possibly tell Lord Ramsay would be worse," I remarked in extenuation.

"But then, you see, he *was* worse," replied the lady, in a quiet, positive tone of voice, as if she had brought the blame home to Lady Percival's door. "And then," she continued, as no one interrupted her, "as she knows very well that our nephew Mr. Ramsay thinks no one's opinion worth having but hers, it was doubly strange."

"But what had Lady Percival's opinion to do with the case?" I asked.

"It had a great deal to do with it," she answered again, in a quietly settling down tone. "No one was supposed to know any thing about it—I mean the nature of the attack," she added, with extreme clearness and precision.

"What! not the nurse nor the doctor?"

"There was no doctor present; at which I

wonder greatly, seeing the precarious state Lord Ramsay is in; and as for the nurse, she *said* it was convulsion, and would no doubt return, and that is the reason we have remained here," and Mrs. Charles looked up at me, with an air of virtuous resignation, and then to her husband, who paced uneasily to and fro, and then added—"and very trying it is to us both."

As these words caught his ear as Mr. Charles Ramsay passed close to his wife in the course of his perambulations, and seeing her eyes also fixed on him, he duly indorsed the sentiment by remarking—

"Ah yes! indeed, very trying to both of us."

"But we should not be doing our duty to run away at such a crisis," said the lady.

"Oh, we would not run away at such a crisis," repeated the gentleman; whilst his wife added, "Not that it appears to me we are particularly wanted—no, not even Charles!—Lord Ramsay's own and only brother! which does appear to me a little extraordinary."

This was said in crescendo tone of voice, with an application of her nose to the bottle in her hand, which appeared to arrest her husband's attention, and excite his sympathy, so that he paused in his walk and said,

"Never mind, Emily, I had rather not be wanted; but I *am* surprised they don't want *you*! Is Alethea upstairs all this time. I wish she would come down and tell us all about it; but don't excite yourself about it, there's a good girl."

"No, my dear, I am perfectly calm; but I confess it is very distressing to my feelings, and also most extraordinary."

What was so extraordinary I never ascertained, but soon after Miss Alethea made her appearance. She was not wanted upstairs in the sick-room, she said, and was, besides, quite exhausted. So she came down stairs for a little change, and hoping to find her brother and his wife not gone.

"No, of course we stayed," said the gentleman; "and I hope now, if all's right upstairs,



that you mean to give us some dinner; these sort of scenes takes a great deal out of ones system, and makes one hungry—don't you feel it so, Emily?"

"No, I am not hungry—I should be surprised if I were; but for all that, the nervous powers require keeping up, and that's what you mean, my dear, when you talk of feeling hungry."

"Well, I knew I felt something; so suppose we order dinner immediately—that is, if it is ready, which I suppose it must be, seeing it is near eight o'clock, and half-past seven is your hour. Are they likely to come down?"

"What! Ramsay and Lady Percival?" returned Miss Alethea. "Oh, no, they begged me to go to dinner without them; they did not know of your being here, but I thought you had not gone, so that is all lucky, for I should have found it very dull and lonely by myself;" and then, as her eye happened to fall on me, she added, "Ah, I forgot you, Marian. You

see you have been out all day with Lady Percival; but now I daresay you would rather join our party downstairs than go to her upstairs."

It was, as may be supposed, a very dreary meal that day; however, the brother and sisters of the dying man contrived to do justice to it, and ate and drank as if nothing had happened to disturb the full enjoyment of their repast. For myself, I could not prevent my thoughts dwelling on the solemnity of that event which was, I felt sure, rapidly approaching the master of the house beneath whose roof this eating and drinking (as in the days of old) was going on. It too forcibly recalled to my mind a similar scene so lately enacted in my own home, the picture of my dying father rose up vividly in my mind and oppressed me almost to a sensation of horror, as I recalled the desolation of that sad event. Glad indeed was I when the two ladies got up at length to leave the dining-room, and then with a sense of freedom that

gave me space to breathe and think in peace, I sought the quiet of my own room, and saw them no more that evening.

The house in Grosvenor Square was a large one, and my room was far removed from that of the dying man, Lord Ramsay occupying a suite of apartments that were almost detached from the house in general. It was not, therefore, till the next morning that I heard that Lord Ramsay had died during the past night. Miss Ramsay had gone to bed, and the only persons with him were his son and Lady Percival. I understood it was a quiet and peaceful ending to a life that was always spoken of as having been a good and useful one. He was a loss to many, but there was few to mourn him within the inner circle of his more private and domestic life. So the weary watching and waiting were ended at last, and when Miss Alethea came herself to my room before I was dressed to announce the event, she spoke of her brother's death as a happy release to himself, and relief

to all those who had been so long in anxious attendance upon him.

“Of course,” said she in conclusion, “I feel my brother’s death as a family loss, but I do not pretend to say to myself it is any great individual sorrow, for there has been but little companionship between us, and I have been longer in his house this last six weeks, since he sent for me, than during the whole of our past lives, since we were children together.”

Having in that speech announced that her grief was not of a very overwhelming nature, Miss Alethea turned her very practical thoughts to the preparation of the mourning that had to be got ready by the approaching solemn occasion.

She had an interview with her nephew (whom she now unflinchingly styled Lord Ramsay), in which she declared her intention of being present at her brother’s funeral, and saying she wished to remain in town till that event had taken place. Of course no opposition could be made to her wishes on the

occasion, and her nephew could only dutifully invite her to remain in his house as long as she was so inclined. When I saw her after this interview she seemed to have made good use of her opportunity and turned the conference to good account, as she confided to me that Lord Ramsay had given her *carte blanche* as to her orders for mourning, which were to be placed to the family account, adding,

“As is quite right and fitting it should be, for I am very poor, as he knows perfectly well, and he is rolling in riches; so it is but fair he should stand the expense of my paying all proper respect to his father’s memory; and he begged me also to give any orders besides that I might like for my sister Markham and Juliet. It was very nice and thoughtful of him, as they would neither of them come here! And I was thinking too, my dear, that I may as well order *you* a nice black silk dress, for your mourning is getting very shabby, and a good black silk is always useful, so

I thought you would be glad to have one."

Against this I however protested so vehemently that, generous as Miss Alethea was inclined to be at another person's expense, she was obliged to forego her liberal intentions in regard to myself. As for her own habiliments, she made the best use of the opportunity afforded, and laid in a store of black garments in all gradations of mourning until nothing remained to mark the purpose for which they were ordered except the sombre hue of the dresses. In fact, Miss Ramsay ordered a perfect *trousseau* of the best and handsomest mourning for herself; nor was she forgetful of her sister and niece, but sent them down handsome and appropriate clothing for the occasion. She did not, however, provide as far into the future for them as she did for herself, as she observed, "When their things were worn out, they could get new," as her sister was not nearly as poor as she pretended to be, though no doubt what she was sending would be very acceptable.

That melancholy week of retirement passed slowly away : having no grief of my own to oppress me, and seeing none around me, as Miss Ramsay was my sole companion during the course of it, there was nothing to divert my thoughts from the sensation of its utter dreariness, though there was something painfully grotesque in Miss Alethea's way of taking her brother's death. No doubt she thought by the depth and length of her mourning to atone for the shallowness of her sisterly grief.

We were perfectly undisturbed, for Lady Percival had gone home the morning after Lord Ramsay's death, and the present lord kept himself secluded in his own apartments, from whence he issued such orders as were necessary, but, except on the one occasion I have mentioned, he saw nothing of his aunt.

We lived in two rooms looking to the back of the great house, the front part of which was closely shut up. Our table was

laid only for two, and Miss Ramsay, though evidently wishing to call in her brother Charles and his wife to enliven her solitude, did not venture upon such a measure in the absence of all encouragement from the present master of the mansion. Nor did they make any attempt to invade the privacy of the dwelling of the dead during that gloomy week.

It was over at last. The funeral had been a very quiet one, in conformity with the wishes of the deceased nobleman. He was interred in a neighbouring cemetery, for there was no old family place belonging to the Ramsays. The late lord was in treaty about the purchase of an estate when his young wife died, and the design was never carried out; and Lord Ramsay left it to his son's pleasure to make any arrangement hereafter that might suit him. A large sum was left expressly to buy a country residence and estate, and there was no restriction in any



way on the present lord's inclinations in so doing.

Miss Ramsay attended the funeral, as she had declared her intention of doing. Happily she did not order my attendance also. Mrs. Charles Ramsay volunteered to be her companion, and I believe they both conducted themselves with perfect equanimity throughout the solemn and trying ceremony. They both duly attended the reading of the will afterwards, and had the satisfaction of finding that Lord Ramsay had left his brother and two sisters both legacies, though by no means considerable, still, it was, as Miss Alethea remarked afterwards, "better than nothing."

With the exception of a few other trifling bequests and remembrances to old servants, the whole of his large property was bequeathed unreservedly to his son, to do exactly as he pleased in every respect. Nothing was entailed; all was left in the

present lord's power. I was told he looked very sad upon this large acquisition of property with all its accompanying honours and responsibility.

We heard that it was Lord Ramsay's intention to leave town that same evening, and he signified the same to his aunt when all was over. She made a species of apology for remaining in his house after his departure from it, but announced her intention of quitting it the day after.

I was very thankful to hear the day was actually fixed, and also that there was no chance of a change, as Lord Ramsay told her the house would remain closed for the present. Lady Percival came to wish us good-bye the next day, and, as Miss Ramsay was busy, I was fortunate in seeing her alone. I felt very sorry I should probably see her no more; our paths lay in such opposite directions there was little chance of their crossing again. But she kindly told me to let her know if she could ever be of

use to me in any way, for that she would be glad to be so, should I ever require it. She further told me she was going in a short time to a friend—a relation, I think in Switzerland, and she had prevailed on Lord Ramsay to take her there.

“He is terribly cut up,” said she, “by the late sad event and all that preceded it. I should be glad to see him happily married in due course of time.”

“Yes, I can easily imagine it,” said I, my thoughts reverting to Flora Crofton.

“You are thinking of your friends?” asked Lady Percival, after a short pause.

“Yes; I only wish you knew them as I do.”

“Well, I think I am beginning to make an acquaintance. I have been studying Mr. Crofton a good deal of late.”

“Ah! through his writings.”

“Yes, thanks to your introduction, I think I begin to see what manner of man he is—and no doubt he is one who would influence his woman-kind considerably.”

“Well, and what do you think of Mr. Crofton?”

“On the whole, I am inclined to like him. I respect his intellect highly, though I imagine his judgment is slightly warped from living too much alone.”

“I think it is the life that suits him best,” said I gravely.

Lady Percival smiled.

“Forgive me, my dear, if I presume to question that point, as well as your capability for so deciding. In my opinion—and I have seen something of the world as well as the people living in it—no man nor woman is the better for shunning the society of his fellow-creatures. There is generally something morbid in the tone of feeling of those who do so.”

“But if they have secluded themselves on account of some crushing sorrow, like that which has overwhelmed Mr. Crofton?”

“He ought to have got over its effects by this time. With health of mind and body, no

man at his time of life, and in his position, has a right to give himself up to such seclusion: besides, and I judge from the whole tenor of his writings, that it does *not* suit him."

"Dear Lady Percival, what can make you form such an opinion?"

"The very fact of his writing at all proves it. He does not write for fame, for he has carefully kept his incognito. Nor for gain, for I believe he is very wealthy; but he writes because he is weary of his solitude—he wants to speak to his fellow-men—at least to men (and women, no doubt) of understanding."

This was a new idea to me, and I pondered it in my mind, and came to the conclusion that it might be so.

Another thing Lady Percival inferred, in regard to my friends, that also gave me much food for reflection. She let me understand that she should in no way endeavour to bias Lord Ramsay's mind in regard to his insipient attachment to Flora. She had stated her objections

to the match to him, but had no doubt he would be entirely guided by his own feelings and Flora's (when he had ascertained them); and whatever might be the result, she would endeavour to be satisfied. She felt sure she said, from all I had told her, that Flora had been most carefully brought up; and if the marriage was ever likely to take place, she would try and forget her mother's sad story.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.









